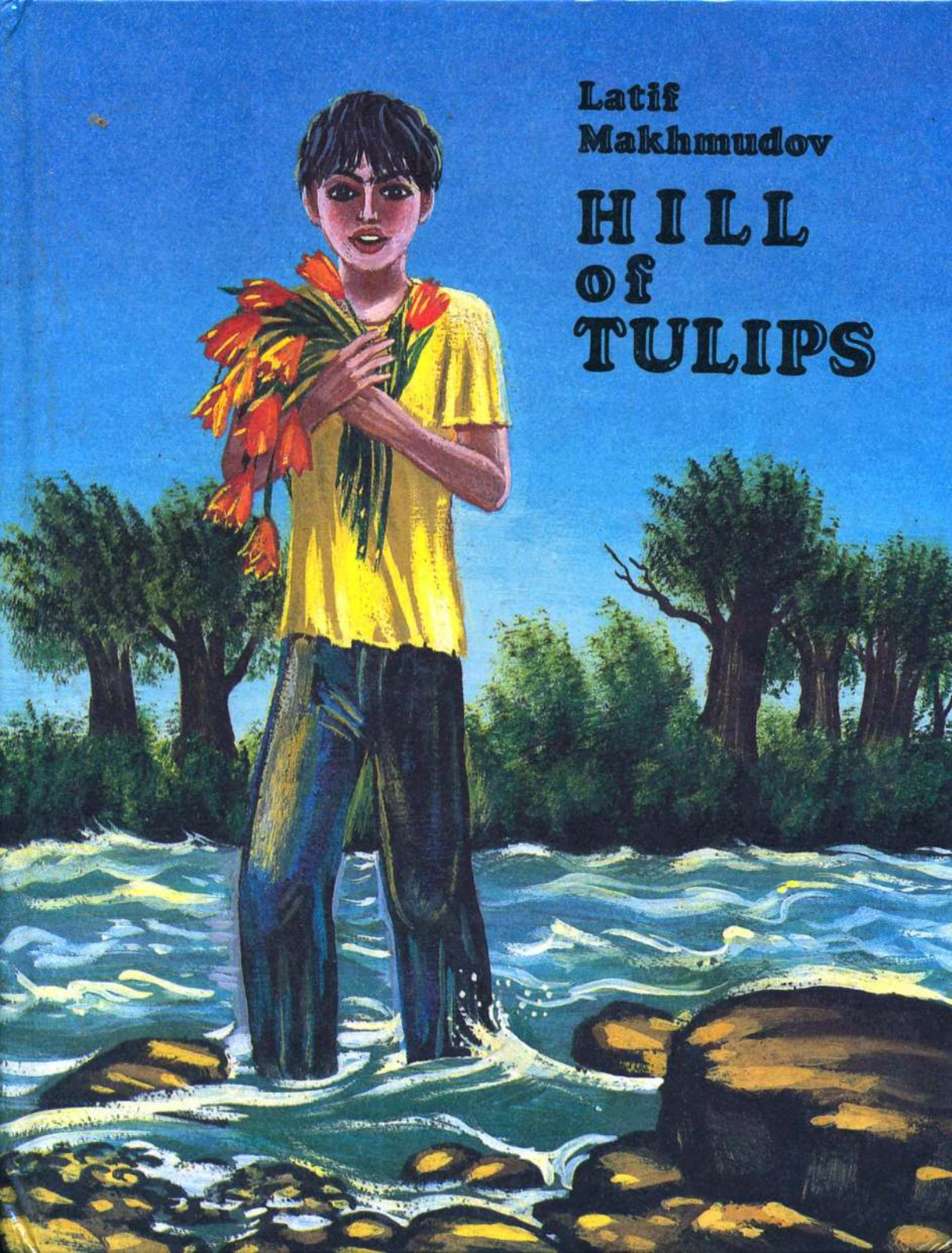

Latif
Makhmudov
HILL
of
TULIPS

RADUGA
PUBLISHERS

ISBN 5-05-001167-1

M.K.U. BOOK CENTRE
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Latif Makhmudov

HILL of TULIPS

Translated by TRACY KUEHN
Illustrations by VASILY SHULZHENKO

RADUGA
PUBLISHERS
Moscow

Л. МАХМУДОВ

ХОЛМ С ТЮЛЬПАНАМИ

На английском языке

© Издательство «Детская литература», 1984 г.
English translation © Raduga Publishers 1987. Illustrated

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

ISBN 5-05-001167-1

5 From the Publisher
8 *Chapter I.* Nocturnal Travelers
12 *Chapter II.* The Chairman's Concerns
21 *Chapter III.* Bouquet of Tulips
27 *Chapter IV.* Evening on the Hill
33 *Chapter V.* Why Shakhlo Was Delayed
40 *Chapter VI.* The Teacher Reikhan
50 *Chapter VII.* Gyulnara
56 *Chapter VIII.* Revenge, Revenge, Revenge
64 *Chapter IX.* The Visitor
78 *Chapter X.* At the Construction Site
90 *Chapter XI.* The Pasture
104 *Chapter XII.* Legend Became Fact
116 *Chapter XIII.* You Shouldn't Have Discharged Him, Son
132 *Chapter XIV.* Mysterious Affairs
147 *Chapter XV.* Maxim the Bricklayer
153 *Chapter XVI.* The Letter
157 *Chapter XVII.* Mysterious Affairs Continue
170 *Chapter XVIII.* The Tea-Room Keeper's Visitor
179 *Chapter XIX.* "The Demented Woman"
192 Epilogue

FROM THE PUBLISHER

The roots of Uzbek literature extend into the distant past and, as any national literature, began with ancient traditions of oral story-telling. The intellect of a people and its fantasies, poetically interpreted facts from real life and created legendary literary heroes. Even ancient Greek historians reported on the creations of the peoples of Central Asia in their writings.

The great Alisher Navoi, in his well-known work *Poetic Collection*, mentions almost four hundred poets, his contemporaries, whom he knew personally. It is not difficult to imagine that there were even more less gifted poets with whom Navoi was not acquainted. And it was true, in the East almost everyone loved poetry, from shoemakers to rulers. Those were difficult times with foreign invaders incroaching onto the territory of present-day Uzbekistan, leaving only smouldering ruins soaked with tears, yet the love of poetry was amazingly strong and the people's ability to maintain that interest despite hardships is greatly admired even today.

Time passed, the poor became poorer and the rich richer. The tsarist government was not interested in educating the peoples in its outlaying regions, therefore there were few schools, and the religious Moslem schools that did exist instilled patience and sub-

missiveness. Only the children of wealthy local landowners *(bais)* and Moslem clergy *(imams* and *ishans)* managed to receive an education in St. Petersburg or Moscow. Ignorance and stagnation reigned among the lower classes. A particularly hard lot fell to women: they were only allowed to give birth to children, fix meals, and care for their husbands whose rule over them was unquestioned. They did not even have the right to go outside without covering their faces.

But such an existence could not continue forever. The Revolution of 1917 woke the peoples of Central Asia and sparked the renaissance of national culture, particularly in the former tsarist colonies. It opened broad possibilities for developing talents of the people.

The new was born from an uncompromising struggle against the old which played on the vestiges in peoples' thinking and age-old prejudices. The struggle against the *bais*, merchants, *ishans* and counter-revolutionary minded officers was not easy. There were also attacks of *basmatch* terrorist gangs (in Turkish *basmak* means to carry out an attack), who mercilessly murdered teachers and agronomists sent by the Soviet government, children and women who wanted to study, and peasants who wanted to raise rice and cotton peacefully.

Emerging Uzbek literature realistically reflected the events of the time. New forms and genres were needed. If poetry predominated in the past, now stories and novels appeared. Literature exposed the Moslem clergy which openly or secretly undermined the new socialist foundations, intimidated believers, and interfered in questions of daily life, the family, morals and even social life. The revolution paved the way to a public life for women, however the old structure of daily life continued to hold her in feudal bondage. The struggle against the stagnation of life and the

propagation of the new became the basic themes of literature.

Uzbek writer Latif Makhmudov was born in 1935. He is the author of more than thirty books, his plays for children are performed in many theaters, and his works have been translated into many languages of the USSR.

His new book, *Hill of Tulips,* tells of unusual and very interesting events. It includes mysterious travelers, a strange incident in a courtyard on a quiet street in town, puzzling disappearances, and unusual searches.

But there is more than exciting adventures. More importantly, the story deals with the struggle of good versus evil, shows the lives of the Uzbek people after the revolution, and tells of good, intelligent, inquisitive people, both adults and children.

Chapter I
NOCTURNAL TRAVELERS

It was almost midnight. The moon, rising from behind the range of sleepy mountains, illuminated a snaky road and two large plane trees growing along it, and then disappeared behind thick clouds.

An occasional car drove by and then the quiet was disturbed. Headlights pierced the dense blackness and the shadows from the trees began a weird dance, like that of monsters in a fairy tale.

A man sat near an irrigation ditch behind the trunk of a plane tree. Whenever a car appeared on the road, he stood up and hid behind the tree until it passed, only then returning to his former spot. He listened in fright to the night sounds, as if trying to make out something familiar amid the frogs' croaking and the cicadas' songs, and did not take his eyes off the far end of the road which was visible when the moon appeared from behind the clouds.

The man sat there for a long time, nibbling at his beard. He stood up after his sensitive ears picked up a sound resembling the squeaking of a cart. He rubbed his numb legs, straightened up, and walked hurriedly toward the sound.

"Is everything all right?" he shouted softly, as soon as the outline of the cart and its driver came into view.

The driver, a frail old man in a quilted coat and an embroidered skull-cap pulled down almost to his eyebrows, was in no hurry to answer. He reined in the horse and sighed tiredly when the other man got in the cart, as if some heavy burden had been lifted from his shoulders. He silently handed over the reins and stretched out on two sheafs of dry, fragrant clover.

"Hurry," he ordered. "We have to reach the village before dawn."

The cart moved. The old man's companion turned, wishing to speak, but the former waved his hand as if to say he was very tired, and curled up, closing his eyes. Something was obviously bothering the younger man, but he remained silent.

The moon came out from behind the clouds. The black curtain of the night raised for an instant above endless fields and orchards. The distant mountains with their snow-covered peaks came into view. The old man sensed the moon through his closed eyelids, and he opened them and looked around the illuminated expanse.

He had known those fields and mountains since childhood, but he was denied the pleasure of seeing the beauty of the orchards, fields and noisy mountain streams shining in the sunlight. He was denied the pleasure of seeing them during the day. Almost his entire life he came out only at night, like a gopher, roaming the dark like a shadow. He was amazed at how fast those boring days, weeks and years flew by. To be more exact, he felt the days and weeks pass but had not noticed the years going by. It was as if a light puff of wind had blown them away. Nights had become his days. Only at night could he breathe freely. He was frightened by human laughter and the sound of voices, and did not leave his burrow until the sun went down. With time the human voice

sounded strange to him, wild somehow, and laughter lacerated his heart like a sharp dagger.

But he continued to live, or rather, exist. And now that existence was threatened. Again, one he thought was dead had re-appeared and begun to stir up the past.

The old man clearly remembered that predawn hour when he attempted to kill the boy. It happened a long time ago. A very long time ago. Stars shone in the sky. A sliver of the moon, looking like a chunk of flat bread, illuminated the winding little streets and the narrow bridge over the river. It was cool. Finally, the cart with the boy appeared. It forded the river. Now the village was behind, and the boy no longer saw any houses or trees. Hills and ravines began. The old man (he wasn't old then) remembered how he asked the boy for a ride and then, a little later, struck him on the head with a rock. The boy fell to the ground. He bent over and kicked him three times with his boot. The boy did not even stir, and seemed to lie without breathing. It was very quiet. Only the cicadas sang. He did not bother to kick him again. He thought the boy was dead. But as it turned out...

"We're almost there," his companion said softly, as if to himself, trying not to disturb the old man's thoughts. He looked back timidly.

The old man noticed his glance, shivered and lifted his head. The sky above the village was clear. Lights shone weakly on the outskirts. The dark outline of the bridge rose in front of them and the river shimmered faintly. The old man frowned, growled something and turned away. Soon he again raised his head.

"Have the grapes ripened?" he asked.

"Yes."

"What about the chairman? Has he changed his mind about that cursed construction project?"

"Who knows?"

"Who knows, who knows," the old man sneered. "You're always hovering around him. Convince him!"

"You can't convince him of anything! He's as stubborn as a mule."

The old man was silent for a moment, then he threatened hollowly:

"Don't you start thinking about running out on me. I'll find you wherever you go."

"Why would I leave you?"

After that strange exchange, they again fell silent.

"Ahhh, a pity," the old man sighed after an uncomfortable pause.

"What are you talking about?" his companion asked, looking back at him over his shoulder.

"Our affairs were going rather well, on the whole," he said, and one could hear anxiety in his voice. "But all the same, I'm uneasy. I didn't see what happened later. That neighbor girl interfered. What was she wandering around for at night?" The old man paused, and then laughed maliciously: "Wouldn't you know it, I just remembered Raissa Maximovna."

The stars went out. Dawn was breaking. The noise from the river intensified. They could now distinctly see the bridge, and the tops of the lombardy poplars which lined the village streets lightened. The old man looked at the village angrily.

"Turn right! Don't go over the bridge," he ordered. "There is a ford further on. We'll cross there."

His companion nodded, pulled on the reins, and turned the horse toward the ford. When they reached the water's edge he stopped and handed the old man a small bundle. The latter took it and began to undo the knot hurriedly.

"Almost my entire life," he hissed. "I'm sick of it."

"There's nothing you can do," his companion said, shrugging his shoulders.

Chapter II
THE CHAIRMAN'S CONCERNS

Muminjan, the collective farm chairman, left the office holding a cup in one hand and a large, blue teapot in the other. He took a few steps and stopped, searching for a cool spot.

"Come over here, Boss!"

Muminjan looked toward the voice. A man with a thin face and sparse beard sat under the branches of a weeping willow, holding his hand to his heart as a sign of invitation. On seeing him the chairman smiled broadly. It was Mulladost, the tea-room keeper. Actually, he was no longer the tea-room keeper, but the chairman's secretary, his right hand, you could say. But everyone in the village still called him the tea-room keeper among themselves.

Muminjan did not want to waste time walking over the bridge to the other side of the irrigation canal where there were hearths for making pilaf and *topchans*, or low, flat wooden platforms, to sit on. He decided to take a shortcut, and jumped clumsily across the ditch. As soon as his feet touched the opposite side, he began to slide down. If the tea-room keeper had not reached him in time, he would have fallen in the ditch which was full of water.

"I'm getting old, Mulladost!" he said laughing, as he sat down on the edge of a *topchan.*

"You must be joking! You're still a young colt! In the time it

takes you to get old, four generations of plane trees will have passed," the tea-room keeper joked.

Whenever the chairman saw that little man his mood improved. He even forgot his exhaustion. Sometimes he arrived upset and gloomy, and would sit on the hard *topchan* and ask Mulladost what was new, just for conversation. And the tea-room keeper would begin to talk about things in the village, knowing details which you hadn't even suspected.

No one but Mulladost always knew who made what for breakfast, lunch and dinner, whose cow calved and what kind of calf was born—in short, there wasn't a thing going on in the large village that Mulladost wasn't aware of. And he knew how to tell a story—sometimes you couldn't tell if he was joking or being serious. Muminjan was always delighted with his tales, and occasionally laughed until he cried.

But Mulladost could do more than talk. He was ready at a moment's notice to take over for the driver of a cart, or fix a truck if there was no mechanic, or fill in for a bricklayer, or work in the joiner's shop making window frames, doors and the like. He could also cook delicious pilaf. Not just for a few guests, but enormous quantities in a pot large enough to feed a hundred people.

No feast or wedding could get by without his help. In the autumn, when the cotton was ready to be picked, everyone went to the fields. No one remained to tend the gardens and the ripe fruit fell to the ground. It could have rotted since the farmers were too busy with the cotton, but Mulladost found time to help. He harnessed a donkey or horse to a cart, and took crates of apples, grapes, and pomegranates to the market in the city. All the farmers of the collective farm were grateful to him. And he did not make a profit — he gave the money he received to the owners. He was just proud that he had helped.

The bushes of black basil Mulladost grew from special seeds which he went out of his way to get from his relatives. He had even asked the chairman for three days off. And those carnations he planted also smelled wonderful. The tall, half-wild althea had no aroma, but they were very beautiful. When Mulladost asked for time off on that occasion, Muminjan had agreed immediately. "Let him go," he thought. "He has no family here and tries to help others. It will be nice for everyone if we have a flower garden near the office." You certainly could depend on Mulladost. He did what he said. Another in his place would brag, but Mulladost was not a bit like that. He was quieter than a mouse and more inconspicuous than an ant.

He lived in an old house at the edge of the village with his feeble aunt who had not been outside for years. The poor woman sat there listening to people's laughter, tears, weddings, and funerals, but she herself could not take part. Numerous times Muminjan had tried to convince Mulladost to move closer to others into one of the new houses built for the collective farmers. But the tea-room keeper refused categorically. Maybe he did not want to disturb his aunt in her old age. She had very little time left on earth. Moving was not something you could do in a day or even a week: it would mean total upheaval, and his aunt was not well.

Be that as it may, Muminjan was pleased with Mulladost. He had taken him on as a secretary because there were a lot of petty problems in the office that the others working there did not have time for. For several years now the former tea-room keeper had taken all those minor matters, and much of the correspondence and accounts, upon himself.

"Hey, Mulladost!"

"Yes."

"Come over here," Muminjan invited.

The chairman poured the remains of the tea and tea leaves in the ditch, and placed his cup bottom-up on the table. That meant he had quenched the thirst which had tormented him since he had returned from inspecting the fields. Mulladost approached the *topchan* and timidly sat down on the very edge.

"You wanted something?"

"What about the trees?"

"It's a shame to cut them down. Let them grow a little more," Mulladost said sadly.

"No, now is just the time. What did the schoolchildren say?"

"They agreed."

"Fine. You can go attend to your own affairs," Muminjan said in a tired voice.

Mulladost left obediently, and the chairman fell into thought. The poplars were so beautiful, standing in even rows along the streets their golden leaves rustling in the breeze. It was truly a shame to chop them down for the construction project. Muminjan had never thought those tiny seedlings planted by untrained schoolchildren would grow so fast. In general, the chairman had a good relationship with the school. He always listened attentively to the teachers' requests and helped with transportation and supplies. He had a large notebook with a hard cover in which he wrote down his more important concerns: "Not enough bricks for farm construction... Satvalda's mother is ill—assign car to take her to regional hospital... Ton of cement needed for small bridge... Roof of fertilizer shed blown off in high wind — repair." Those were the kinds of things he jotted down. The teachers' requests were also carefully noted. And he had never failed to carry out his promises. Perhaps that was why the chil-

dren did not avoid him, and asked if they needed anything.

Once when he had gone to school, the kids surrounded him as usual. Among them was his own son, Ravshan.

"Dad, can I show you something?" he had asked, coming forward. "Will you come with us?"

"Certainly, son."

"Let's go."

"Where?"

"In just a minute you'll see for yourself," his son said, and winked gaily at his friends.

He took his father's arm. Muminjan looked questioningly at the teacher, Usmanali, but the latter only smiled mysteriously. They walked over to the school's experimental plot, and the chairman immediately noticed young apple trees, crossbred by the children themselves from the best sorts.

"Great, aren't they?" Ravshan asked, not letting go of his arm.

Muminjan understood what he was driving at.

"Well kids, I give you permission to plant their seedlings along the streets," he said smiling. "Only be careful that all the apple trees are in a neat row and evenly spaced."

The children began to thank him noisily, excited that Muminjan had entrusted them with such an important job.

A week later Mulladost brought an entire cartful of poplar seedlings from somewhere. The chairman called the schoolchildren together.

"Poplars are good," he told them. "First, they clean the air, and second, their logs will come in handy for some construction project or other."

He was in a very generous mood that day and gave them permission to plant apple seedlings between the poplars.

Both the poplar and apple trees quickly took root, and gave

their first shoots. The children became even more interested and cared for the plants zealously. After all, it gives one a good feeling to see trees he planted grow. Now the apple trees were already bearing fruit. True, not much yet, but fruit all the same. And the poplars were very tall. Ravshan had been small then, and now he was about to finish the eighth grade. A few more years and he would be a man. How time flies!

And if the construction project ever got underway, the young people would give it their all. The teacher Usmanali was right.

Two weeks before, he had overheard an interesting conversation. His students were talking about the construction being done in the large clearing behind the school playground. A gym was being built. The foundation had already been laid, as well as three or four rows of bricks. But the work had come to a standstill. For the last five months the construction crew had been working on the farm where they were adding on to the barn. The gym was to be completed this year, but now it was clear it would be difficult to meet that goal. The bricklayers had been held up on the farm construction too long. Then Usmanali, on entering the classroom, overheard his students discussing finishing the gym themselves. If only the collective farm would assign a couple of bricklayers, they would do the rest. The summer was just beginning and they could have a roof on the building by autumn. Then the inside details could be finished during the winter. Everything depended on the chairman: would he give them the bricklayers?

"You have made a good decision," the teacher said. "Now you only have to begin."

"We're ready," answered Askar, one of the brightest boys in the class. "If the girls will fix lunch, then we can move

mountains. And they should make sure the tea is fragrant and strong..."

"Oh, Askar, our incomparable hero!" Munira smiled mischievously. "Tell us please, what food strikes your fancy."

"Juicy shish kebab, right from the coals."

"And what else?" the girls asked noisily. "What else does your heart desire? Maybe we should make meat dumplings for you too?"

"That would be fine, if you sprinkle a little black pepper on the top and add a dash of yogurt," Askar closed his eyes and gulped. "But it would be even better if you made stew with first class noodles."

"Askar, we already know you love to eat," Ozoda said. "But what else can you do?"

"Eat, and work."

"Give him an apron and he can wash dishes," Nartaji said.

"Why?" one of the boys protested. "Askar is the tea-room keeper's best pupil. Let him make the tea."

"No, that's no good," Askar started. "Let Anzor keep the tea kettle going."

The young people suddenly fell silent, feeling uncomfortable. Askar's harmless joke had offended Anzor. It went without saying that they would assign Anzor the lightest work since he was crippled in one leg. Anzor's eyes grew large, and he raised his eyebrows. A tic appeared in his left cheek.

"I plan to rest this summer," he said, and stretched his thin neck. "Let the one who loves to give orders make the tea," and he looked at Ravshan angrily.

That was the last thing Ravshan expected.

"What? Repeat what you said!"

Clenching his fists, he took a step toward Anzor, but he

stopped on noticing Munira's pleading look. She bit her lip and shook her head slightly. Ravshan walked away.

Anzor shivered, as if in a fever. He could not contain himself any longer and moved to the door. As soon as he left the others forgot the incident. They again returned to the interrupted conversation and decided once and for all that they would build the gym themselves.

* * *

A few days later, as the chairman walked by the school, he turned sharply and entered the yard. He had not planned to pay a visit.

"Is Usmanali here?" he shouted, seeing several children.

"Yes."

"Tell him to get his class together and come outside."

Soon everyone had gathered.

"Who needs that gym, me or you?" he began angrily. "Why haven't my orders been carried out?"

The young people exchanged surprised glances.

"What are you staring at? Mulladost has told you twice already."

"About what?"

"What do you mean, what? Come with me."

He walked some distance in silence, not looking back.

"Find an axe somewhere, Ravshan," he suddenly said loudly.

When Ravshan returned, they had already reached the poplars.

"Well, what are you standing there for?" his father shouted.

"What is it, Dad?"

"Give me the axe," the chairman looked at the young people

in annoyance. "Do you at least know how to hold it?"

Ravshan cringed. He knew nothing on earth could appease his father's anger at such moments.

Muminjan took the axe, stamped over to the nearest poplar, and struck it with all his might. He chopped it just as furiously several more times, and the tree swayed and fell to the ground. Muminjan felt the anger flowing out of him.

Nevertheless, he walked over to another tree, and was about to strike it when he heard someone sigh deeply behind him. He turned and saw his son with his eyes full of tears. Muminjan dropped his arms tiredly. He suddenly realized his son was now an adult. There was no reason to have talked to him like that, particularly in front of the others. But it was too late, the deed had been done. He threw down the axe.

"Water the apple trees," he said, not looking at the young people. "They haven't been watered for a long time."

With that, he left.

Chapter III
BOUQUET OF TULIPS

A large hill rose on the bank of the river, not far from the bridge. From the top one could see far into the distance. Probably due to the fact that it was located far from the ploughed fields, no one had touched it, while other hills had been leveled by bulldozers long ago and the land planted with cotton. That one stood as it had one hundred years ago.

It was a noisy place both winter and summer. In the summer, after a swim in the river, the children ran up its sandy slope

which was warmed by the sun, and in the winter, flew down it on their sleds. In the spring, when the snow melted, the first grass appeared on the hill, soon followed by tulips which covered it with a red and yellow carpet. The hot summer sun dried the grass and then the hill resembled a shaved head.

Now the hill looked naked and unsightly, but to Munira, who walked by every day, it always seemed green and covered with red tulips.

Tulips! It was thanks to them that Munira began to pay attention to Ravshan.

It happened last year. That day she had left school with the others. Suddenly she smiled and shouted happily:

"I see them! I see them!"

No one understood what she was talking about. Then they noticed fiery red tulips on the slopes of the hill. Munira ran toward it, and Ozoda, Askar and Ravshan raced after her.

"What's all the fuss over tulips," Anzor grumbled in displeasure. But even he did not want to fall behind his classmates, and ran after them, limping.

Munira tore up the hill. The grass was still wet with rain. The girl's feet were soaked, but she did not care. She reached the top, picked several flowers, and slid back down. She scraped her knees but did not seem to notice.

"Look at her! She is crazy about tulips," Askar laughed.

"Oh, Munira!" Ozoda said anxiously when Munira approached them, covered with grass stains. "Look at you!"

"Don't listen to her," Askar told Munira. "Come with me if you are so crazy about tulips."

"Where?"

"To the pasture. You think those are tulips? I'll show you such huge ones you'll be speechless."

"That's all right," Munira said, smiling and shaking her head. "These are just fine. See how beautiful they are?"

Ravshan could not hold back a smile. It was the first time he had seen Munira so happy. She was new in their class. She and her mother had moved to the village not long ago. Before that, she had gone to school in town. Initially, Ravshan had not liked her. And she did not get along with the other girls right away either. She was friendly only with Anzor at first. Maybe that was because they lived next door to one another, or because they sat next to each other in school.

Looking at Munira's flushed face, Ravshan turned to Anzor with a smile:

"Look, Anzor, Munira picked only red ones, the color of love. Maybe she wants to give them to you?"

Anzor frowned. Then Munira, who was showing everyone her tulips, turned to him.

"Anzor, look at the flowers! It would be better if you wrote poems about them instead of sulking and being angry with everyone. I'd love to read them."

Anzor smiled broadly, and even tried to hop, having thought up a practical joke. Suddenly he tore the tulips out of Munira's hand and ran away, limping. He hoped Munira would come after him, but she was hurt because he had grabbed them away from her so impudently. She almost cried, like a baby who has candy taken away.

"Hey, Anzor, give her back the tulips!" Ozoda shouted, pitying her friend.

But Anzor had no intention of stopping. When he had almost reached the cement bridge, Ravshan could contain himself no longer and ran after him. Anzor looked back as he left the path to cross the bridge and seeing Ravshan coming

after him, began to run even faster. On the bridge he stopped, out of breath. He did not have the strength to go on. Ravshan caught up with him. Anzor held the bouquet high over his head.

"Don't you dare touch them!"

"Give them to me!" Ravshan said, and reached for the flowers.

Anzor realized he could not keep them from him.

"Then no one will have them!" he shouted, and threw them in the river. He laughed. Ravshan wanted to hit him, and even raised his fist. Anzor covered his face with his hands to ward off the blow. Then he heard something heavy hit the water and Munira scream. Anzor dropped his hands — Ravshan was gone. He peeked through the metal railing and saw Ravshan swimming after the tulips. The current was quickly carrying them to the middle of the river. The young people ran along the bank shouting.

"Ravshan! You're crazy!" Ozoda's voice rang out.

"Get out, Ravshan! Get out of the water!" Munira cried.

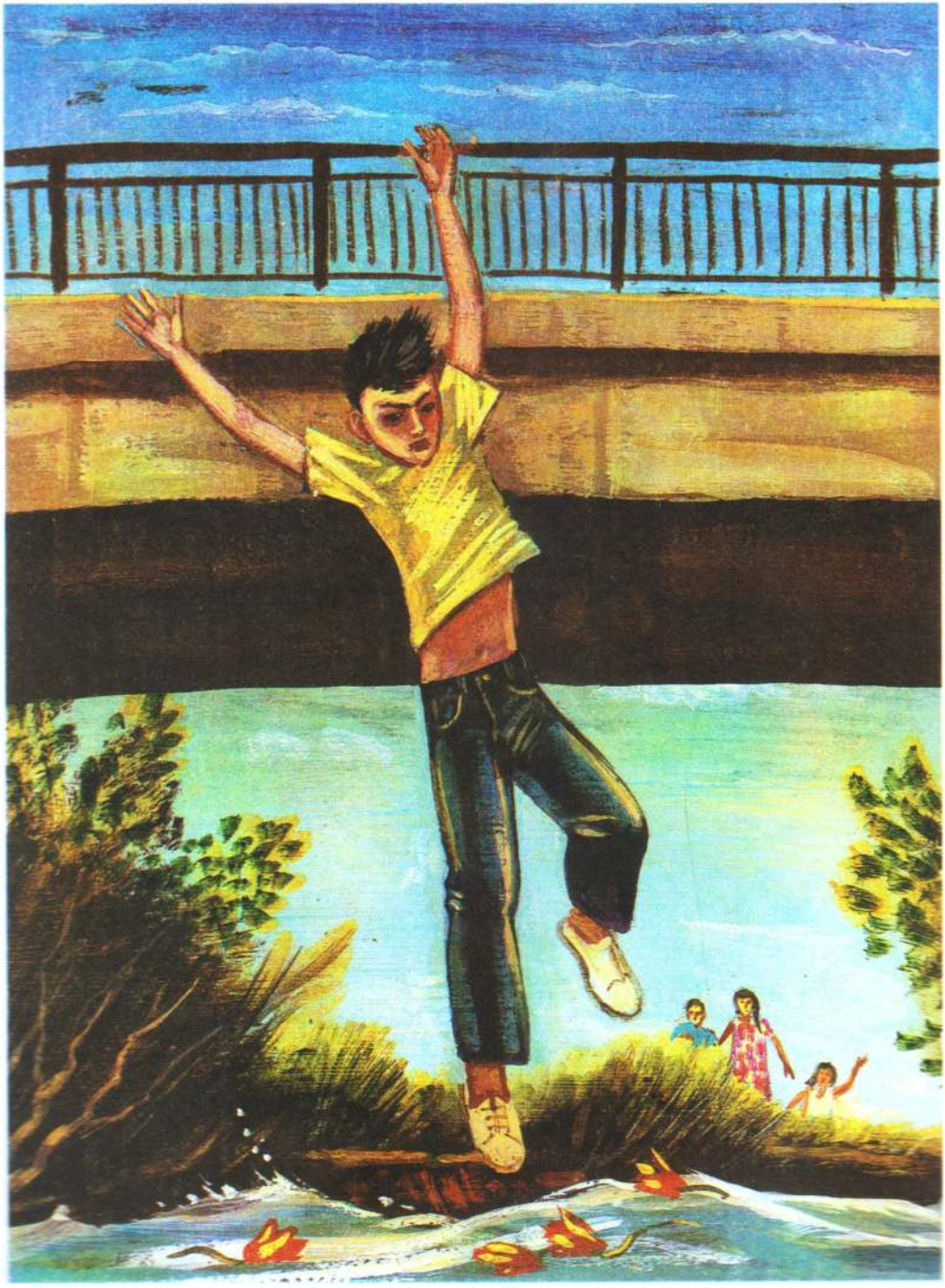
But the girls' shouts were drowned out by the noise of the river. Ravshan, of course, heard nothing.

Askar wanted to dive in as well, but decided against it and only repeated quietly:

"Ravshan, Ravshan, to dive in after tulips. Just for tulips..."

A log lay on the bank. The young people rolled it into the water and gave it a hard push. The waves carried the log to the middle of the river. Ravshan was having trouble fighting the current which pushed him first to the left, and then to the right. Sometimes he disappeared completely under water, but again surfaced and continued to swim after the flowers.

The log was now floating next to him. He grabbed the end quickly. Holding on with one arm and paddling with the other,



he steered the log to an eddy where two tulips were swirling, and caught them.

He came out of the water cold and blue. Water streamed from his clothes. But there was such joy in his eyes! And Munira noticed that joy.

An entire year had passed since then, but she had not forgotten how Ravshan dove into the water for her tulips.

And today, walking by the hill, Munira again stopped automatically.

"Munira!"

She started, not expecting anyone. Looking back, she saw Ravshan standing a few meters away.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

Ravshan did not expect that question and became confused. He blinked. He could not say he was on his way home — his house was in the opposite direction, near the collective farm offices.

"Nothing," he finally answered, afraid that the pause was too long. "Just walking. And why do you sit here in the evening?"

"How do you know I sit here?"

Ravshan bit his lip. What could he say? She would think he was spying on her, but he wasn't. It was just that he had often seen her on the hill when he returned from the fields with his father.

Munira noticed he was uncomfortable.

"I wait here for my mother if she is late," she said. "She works in the hospital."

"Are you going to wait for her tonight?"

She did not answer, but only smiled and ran home.

Chapter IV
EVENING ON THE HILL

The evening shadows lengthened in the village.

Munira climbed the hill and sat down, wrapping her arms around her legs. Soon the moon rose and lit the streets and houses which lined the river banks, and the winding road which disappeared behind dark patches of orchards. Munira knew that road down to the smallest stone. It began on the other end of the village, where the hospital was located.

Her mother worked in that hospital. Each evening, when she appeared on the road, Munira would stand up and run down the hill to meet and embrace her. No other moment was so wonderful to her than when she threw herself on her mother's neck, out of breath. Her tired mother would gently run her fingers through the girl's hair.

That day Munira left home earlier than usual. As soon as the first stars came out, her heart began to beat faster. Her legs had moved automatically toward the hill.

Something rustled nearby. Munira was frightened, but she sat still, trying not to show her fear. Then a long shadow appeared and stopped.

Munira turned around. Ravshan!

"Why are you here?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"Why are you?"

"I already told you, I wait for my mother here."

Ravshan wiped his forehead and remained standing, shuffling from one foot to the other. He felt very uncomfortable.

"I was walking by and saw you sitting here."

"You don't live around here, how could you see me?"

Ravshan did not answer. He bent down, pulled out a handful of grass, and began to rub it in his fingers. Munira knew he had come on purpose, why was she asking? Then he noticed she was smiling.

"Are you laughing?" he asked softly.

"I was just..."

"What?"

"You won't get angry?"

"Why should I get angry?"

"I remembered what happened a few days ago, near the poplars."

"When?" Ravshan asked, not understanding.

"Your father. Is he that cross at home too?"

"No, he's not like that," Ravshan said after a pause. "You see, Munira, he can't be happy or angry halfway."

"Your father is nice," she said.

Ravshan took heart, and sat down a little farther down the hill from her. Munira brushed back her bangs and Ravshan noticed how her large eyes shone.

"And you're a lot like him."

Ravshan stared at her, not understanding what she was getting at.

"What do you mean, like him?"

"Well, cross like he is," she said hurriedly.

And though Munira was talking about anger, Ravshan melted. He was prepared to listen to her forever.

"Am I really cross?" And he blushed, realizing he was showing off a little.

"You almost hit Anzor that time," she said.

"Did you like the way he acted?"

"All the same. You shouldn't fight with him. Why bother?

But he is a little strange. Is it true he is older than everyone else?"

"He repeated a grade. The kids his age will be graduating soon."

"I think I did the right thing to change seats."

"Why?"

"No special reason," she said vaguely. "It's just better not to have anything to do with him."

No one in the class knew why Munira had moved away from Anzor and that was why Ravshan repeated his question:

"Come on, Munira. Tell me why."

"I already said he is very strange. Promise not to tell anyone, all right? My mother found some poems in my notebook. Apparently, he wrote them and stuck them in between the pages. That's why."

She fell silent.

"Did you say anything to him?"

"Why should I?" she shrugged her shoulders. "Look, here he comes!"

Anzor appeared on the opposite bank. He was leading a donkey by the reins. The animal was loaded down with brushwood.

"His father is the watchman in the orchard," Ravshan said. "He cuts off the dry branches, and Anzor carts them away."

Munira looked hesitantly at Ravshan. He stood up and went to the other side of the hill until Anzor passed. Munira was grateful to him for understanding. If Anzor had seen the two of them there, he would have mocked them.

"He carries brushwood every evening," she said when Ravshan returned. "Only he doesn't take it home."

"Where then?"

"To the tea-room keeper's. You'll see for yourself."

Soon Mulladost appeared on the old road leading to the clearing near the school. He walked up to Anzor with unhurried, little steps, spoke to him briefly, and then turned, leading the donkey by the reins. The boy walked back toward the collective farm orchards.

Munira and Ravshan were silent for a long time, listening to the sounds from the river.

They heard a motor in the distance. Then a truck appeared, lit up the hill for an instant with its headlights. It crossed the bridge and turned in the direction Mulladost had taken. Then it again grew quiet.

"That truck is not one of the collective farm's," Munira thought. "I wonder why it's here. It comes here every Saturday. Where is it going?"

"Munira," Ravshan said interrupting her thoughts.

"What?"

"Why did you do that then?"

"I don't understand what you are talking about."

"Remember when I asked you to tell me the answer to the problem. And you teased me."

"I remember," she said, laughing. "I can even explain, if you won't get upset. I also remember another day, when I first came to school. I felt awful. I stood at the door and did not know what to do. The room was full of strange kids. There were empty seats next to you and next to Anzor. He invited me to sit down, but you didn't even look at me."

"Yes I did," Ravshan said.

"Actually, you did, but as if you were looking right through me."

"That's not true!"

"Yes, it is."

"Maybe it seemed to you like that," Ravshan persisted. "I didn't think you were one to hold grudges."

Munira laughed.

"You can't imagine how girls can get their feelings hurt over things like that."

As soon as Munira said that she bit her lip in embarrassment. It was amazing how that always happened. When she left the house she wondered why strange words always came out of her mouth when she talked to Ravshan. At that moment Munira was even a little frightened at her own thoughts, and leaped to her feet:

"Mama's coming!"

She raced down the hill and seemed to fly toward her mother, who was already on their side of the river.

Ravshan almost followed, but why should he run after Munira? Just because he felt like it, that's all.

Munira walked home with her mother. Ravshan watched them go, then lay face down in the grass and remained there a long time, rubbing his hot face in the cool blades.

* * *

That evening Tutikhan, a heavy-set, bustling woman, waited a long time for her son.

"Where have you been?" she asked reproachfully when he entered the yard. "At least you could have warned me you'd be late."

Ravshan did not answer. His mother shook her head and

went to the hearth where she had kept supper warm for him. Then they ate their meal in silence on a large wooden *topchan* set in the middle of the garden. Ravshan had no appetite, but he ate so as not to upset his mother.

Then he made up a bed in the yard and lay down. But he could not sleep, and stretched out on his back to look at the stars. He noticed a falling star. Maybe Munira saw that star too.

"Why did he go to bed so early?" he heard his father ask.

"He's probably tired," his mother answered.

"Ravshan is already an adult," his father said, lowering his voice. Ravshan heard a creak and knew his father had sat down on the *topchan*. "Usmanali came to see me a few days ago to tell me his students want to work on the gym construction this summer."

"What did you say?"

"What could I say? They already helped with the poplars. And those kids can really work. It will be good for them, too. They'll earn a little money for clothes and books."

"Have you had any news from town?"

"None so far," his father said anxiously. "What could have happened? She shouldn't have been delayed."

They were talking about Shakhlo, the daughter of his father's friend from town. Last year she had spent about three weeks with them and his parents had liked her a lot. This summer she was coming to see them again. According to a recent letter, she was to have arrived two days ago. But his parents' anxiety about Shakhlo did not concern Ravshan much. He was thinking about Munira: had she seen that falling star?

Chapter V
WHY SHAKHLO WAS DELAYED

The very night the mysterious travelers on the cart rode to the village, a very strange incident occurred in one of the courtyards on a quiet street in town.

The owner of the house was the literature teacher, Salijan, a middle-aged man with hair touched with grey. He was tan, and had lively, brown eyes. People felt drawn to him immediately. He loved children and because of that, not only the children respected him but their parents as well. Recently he had learned that his neighbor and his wife were going to Issyk-Kul Lake on vacation. Salijan had asked them to take his wife and eleven-year-old daughter who had had pneumonia that spring. The neighbors agreed, and Salijan was left alone at home. Toward the middle of the summer he intended to spend about a week in the village where he was born, both for vacation and because he was planning to write about his childhood and the first schools in the Uzbek republic and needed to collect material.

But now he was thinking he might have to postpone the trip. He had just awakened with a splitting headache. He was surprised. What could have happened? He had felt fine the day before, and now was lying in bed and the neighbors' daughter and her grandmother were sitting next to him. He raised on his elbows in an effort to get up, but he was too weak. His head felt heavy and he couldn't lift it.

"Are you feeling better?" the old woman asked, bending over him.

"What happened to me?" he asked bewildered.

The old woman did not answer. Apparently she had not

heard him, his voice was so weak. She got up and went next door. A short while later she returned with a bowl of sour milk. Salijan took a few sips and felt a little better. Then he went back to sleep.

When he again awoke he looked around for the old woman and her granddaughter. When he saw them he cheered up a little: they were collecting the apples and pears that had fallen from the trees the night before.

"Shakhlo!" he called quietly to the girl.

She walked over with a pail in her hand. She was a little frightened. What if he asked her about the previous evening? She did not want to think about it, much less retell the events. But no matter how she tried to remain calm, it was not difficult for Salijan to guess that she was upset.

"Well, my young friend, why don't you tell me what happened..."

* * *

The day before, around noon, Shakhlo had set out for her friend's house. She was in a wonderful mood because she had just passed her last exam. Now she wanted to see someone and share her happiness. When she returned she saw her grandmother sitting on a stool next to the cow, and very upset. An empty pail stood on the ground next to her. The cow was up to her usual tricks. She did not like anyone except Shakhlo's mother to milk her. Somehow the two of them managed to fill the pail. Her grandmother poured some milk into a large bowl and covered it with a cloth.

"Take this to Salijan since there is no one to take care of him," she said.

They had been helping Salijan with household affairs for the past several days. Shakhlo went outside and turned into the neighboring gate. She found Salijan at work: he was propping up the heavy, fruitladen branches of his apple trees with forked sticks. When he saw Shakhlo, he shook his head, as if to say why are you making such a fuss over me — I can manage by myself. But Shakhlo acted as if she did not notice, put the bowl on the table, and left.

* * *

"Did you see anyone outside when you came with the milk?"

"No, there wasn't anyone outside."

"How about when you left? You didn't see anyone then either?"

"No, I didn't. There wasn't anyone around."

But as soon as she spoke, she remembered there had been a man, a stranger. He had been working in their yard, carrying pitchforks of hay to the barn. Her grandmother had said the man sold them an entire cart of hay that morning. She had purchased the hay on the condition that he unload and carry it into the yard. Shakhlo had not paid any attention to him. She had come home and immediately begun to pack her things in order to leave for the village the next morning. "If I could only leave right away," she had thought. "I'm so tired..." The entire time she was taking exams she had not gotten enough sleep and had been very tense and anxious. Now she wanted to get to the village as soon as she could, take evening walks through its quiet lanes, relax, and swim in the cold river. There was a fine man there, Muminjan, the chairman, who was her

father's friend. They had been in the same ward in the hospital several years before and had become friends. Last year Muminjan had come to visit them and had taken Shakhlo back to stay with his family in the village. Initially she hadn't liked the place: there were unfamiliar people all around and the streets were not like city streets. Then she had adjusted and was even sorry when it was time to return to town. She had often thought about the village and had told her grandmother what a wonderful time she had. When her parents were making plans to go on vacation, she again mentioned the village, but her father had objected: "Your grandmother will be alone, Shakhlo. It would be better if you wait until we return. Then I'll take you myself." But her grandmother had supported her. "The poor girl is exhausted after those exams, let her go and rest. Look at how pale she is. And the air is clean there. Let her go." Her father did not argue with Grandmother. The members of the family respected her and her word was law.

Shakhlo told Salijan about the hay seller. Her neighbor listened attentively.

"You never saw him before? Perhaps he has brought hay on other occasions."

"No," Shakhlo said, shaking her head. "It was the first time I'd seen him."

Salijan thought for a while, and then asked Shakhlo what the man looked like, how he was dressed, and how tall he was. The girl couldn't say for sure. She hadn't been interested in the man. She was in a hurry to pack, and had not even noticed when he finished bringing in the hay and left. Her grandmother also did not remember what the man looked like.

"All right," Salijan said. "Now tell me what happened after that. Why did you decide to come see me?"

That Shakhlo remembered well. She and her grandmother had eaten supper, and then her grandmother had begun to work on a new quilt. Shakhlo had sat with her for a while, and then had fallen asleep. Late that night her grandmother had wakened her.

"Shakhlo, was Salijan home?"

Shakhlo did not understand her grandmother's question at first, but managed to rouse herself and tell her grandmother he had been home.

"Are you sure?" her grandmother asked, sitting down next to her.

"Of course, I'm sure. What happened?"

"I don't know. I thought I heard something heavy fall behind his garden wall. And the light isn't on at his house. I thought maybe someone has come and Salijan isn't home."

Shakhlo was now wide awake. An unexplainable shiver passed through her body. She stood up and listened.

It was quiet next door. Usually a light burned at Salijan's until the wee hours of the morning. Perhaps the teacher had gone to bed early? But it wasn't like him to do that. Maybe he was ill.

"I'm worried about Salijan," her grandmother said. "Let's go see him. He is alone in a large house, anything could have happened." Her grandmother rubbed her aching legs and stood up. "Let's go," she repeated.

When Shakhlo reached that part in the story, she fell silent. It was terrible to even think about what happened next. It was as if she were reliving yesterday's scare.

"Tell me," Salijan urged.

She and her grandmother had gone outside and approached Salijan's gate. Shakhlo had pushed it, but it was locked. When-

ever their neighbor went somewhere, he left the key with her grandmother in case someone came when he was not home. Shakhlo and her grandmother thought perhaps he had stepped out for a short time and had taken his key with him. They turned to go home, but suddenly her grandmother stopped.

"Knock one more time. Maybe something did happen."

They returned and Shakhlo knocked loudly, but no one answered. She pounded on the gate once more, this time harder than before. The brace fell, and the gate opened with a squeak. A little frightened, they entered the yard. Shakhlo noticed the kitchen door was ajar, and thought she smelled an unpleasant odor coming from there. "The tea kettle probably boiled over and put out the gas flame," she decided, and went into the kitchen to turn off the burner. Then...

What happened then, Salijan already knew from the grandmother's fragmented story. But he had doubts, all the same. She was elderly and her vision was poor. Maybe she had gotten mixed up.

But his neighbor had not imagined anything.

When Shakhlo turned on the light on the veranda, her grandmother stayed outside, afraid to fall climbing the steps. She watched her granddaughter enter the kitchen. Then she heard the sound of someone falling, and the girl screamed. Her grandmother still did not know how she managed to get to the veranda when she had just been afraid to climb the steps. When she entered the kitchen, a terrible smell filled the room and her head began to spin. She walked toward her granddaughter's voice in the dark, helped her to her feet and led her out of the kitchen quickly. Shakhlo muttered something but her grandmother couldn't understand what she was talking about. When the girl came to herself, they again went inside. After

turning on the light they saw the owner of the house lying on the floor near the gas stove. Her grandmother realized immediately that Shakhlo had stumbled and fallen on Salijan's prostrate body. One of the burners was on and gas hissed. Shakhlo and her grandmother barely managed to drag Salijan out on the veranda.

"Thank goodness the door was open slightly," Salijan said. "Otherwise, I don't want to think what might have happened."

"If we had lit a match, the kitchen would have blown up," Shakhlo thought, and shivered.

"Strange," Salijan said after a pause.

And it was strange. After finishing propping up the apple trees, he had eaten, laid down, and fallen asleep. In the summer he slept outside in the yard, as did many. He had woken and gone to the kitchen feeling thirsty. He had reached for the light switch and... He did not remember what happened next. But why had he turned on the gas?

The old woman was sure Salijan must have been very tired, so tired that he even forgot when and why he had gone to the gas stove. And then, his head apparently spun and he had fallen. But no matter how he tried, Salijan could not accept that explanation. Nevertheless, he had been saved from certain death.

Trying not to look at Shakhlo's frightened, pale face, he spoke with forced indifference:

"You never know when misfortune is going to strike. When are you planning to leave?" he added after a pause.

"I don't know," Shakhlo said softly.

"Don't put it off," he said. "You are only going for three weeks. You won't even notice how they'll fly by. It is wonderful in that village: fresh air, water! You'll swim in the river and go fishing. Oh, I forgot, girls don't like to fish. I don't know

about now, but in my day there was a large hill in the village. We used to climb it and sunbathe there after swimming."

"So you've been there?"

"Of course," Salijan smiled. "Though it was a long time ago. I was born in the very village where you stayed last year. It's a pity I didn't know you were going. I left when I was still a young boy. Was raised in an orphanage. Those were difficult years. It was hard for everyone. Then I studied and began to work. And the war began. Perhaps there isn't anyone left who knew me. And if there are, they probably forgot me already. It was a long time ago. And the village wasn't very big, about fifty houses in all."

Salijan fell silent. It was hard for Shakhlo to believe that he had swum in that river and lay at the foot of the big hill as a boy.

"You go to the village," he said. "But don't forget to drop in and see me before you leave. I want to tell you something."

Chapter VI
THE TEACHER REIKHAN

The next day Salijan got up relatively late, when the sun already peeked over the garden wall.

He had slept deeply, and hadn't heard Shakhlo open the gate and go into the kitchen. The first thing he noticed when he awoke was that his headache was gone, but he still had a foul taste in his mouth. He forced himself to drink a cup of bitter, green tea that Shakhlo brought, and ate a piece of flat bread. Then Shakhlo's grandmother appeared with a bowl full of milk.

"Drink up, son, it will cure all your ailments. I added some black pepper."

"Thank you," Salijan said as he took the bowl.

"Shakhlo, go get a little basil," her grandmother said.

When Shakhlo brought the basil, Salijan chopped it finely, added it to the milk, and drank.

"Strange, who puts basil in milk?" Shakhlo thought as she left the yard.

But her grandmother was right: after drinking the milk and basil Salijan felt better. Then he noticed a twig of the fragrant herb lying on the path. He walked over, picked it up, and inhaled. A pleasant shiver ran through his body and he felt all his aches and pains drain from his body.

He remembered that his mother had loved basil. As soon as the snow melted, she would plant seeds. No sooner did a few leaves appear on the sprouts than she would pick them and distribute them among the neighbors. In the summer she wore a sprig of basil in her hair. She dried large amounts each autumn, and kept it in a bag until spring.

She had been a kind, gentle woman. When Salijan came in from playing, dirty, with bruises and a torn shirt from fighting with the collective farm chairman's grandson (he had been a rowdy boy) his mother did not say a word. But if he so much as accidently trampled just one plant, she would scold him.

"What have you done, you vandal!" she would say. "Why don't you look where you're going?"

"So what?" Salijan would wave his hand. "Why get upset over weeds?"

"Don't you dare talk like that." His mother would straighten the stem, tear off a leaf, and hold it under her son's nose. "Smell this, and you'll understand why I'm yelling at you."

Salijan, in order to egg his mother on, would wrinkle up his nose.

"But your eyes say something else," she would laugh.

Salijan would continue to tease her: he either tore off a whole branch and ran away, or untied the calf which stood near the barn. While his mother would retie the calf, shouting at him, he would climb up the half-collapsed clay wall to the barn roof like a cat, and sit there for a long time, looking at the narrow bridge across the river which wound down through the plain. In the distance, in the top of an old plane tree by the river, a stork trilled incessantly: he flew to their village every year.

In the summer the streets of the village were usually empty. The adults were in the fields, while the children drove sheep and cows down to the river to graze while they swam until dusk. Whenever they got cold, they would climb out of the water and run to the hill with its hot sand, lying there as long as they liked.

Often Salijan lay in the sand waiting for his father's cart to appear. As soon as it came into view, he dove into the river and swam rapidly across, like a fish. Once on the opposite bank, he ran to meet his father, water streaming off him. He climbed in the cart and his father gave him the reins. Salijan turned the horse to the ford, not to the bridge. He loved to drive the cart across the river. While the current made every effort to carry the cart downriver where huge boulders stuck out of the water, the horse did not give in and pulled the cart to the opposite shore. Salijan urged the animal on, snapping the whip in the air (his father did not allow him to strike the horse).

The kids lying on the hill envied Salijan who could handle

the horse so skillfully. As soon as the cart climbed up on the opposite bank, Melikuzy, Salijan's friend, ran over and asked to take the reins. (The two of them had tests of strength and endurance almost every day.) Salijan never refused, and Melikuzy drove the horse all the way to the office where his grandfather, the collective farm chairman, often was.

"It's time you stopped running around all day. The school will open soon," Salijan's father told him one day.

Salijan had heard that a school was about to open in the large abandoned shed of the *ishan,* a holy man of the Muslim faith. Melikuzy had told him. Salijan did not like that shed. He remembered the fire when they brought his father home barely alive, remembered how his mother had cried, thinking his father would not survive. He even avoided passing by that cursed shed. Years before *Ishan* Usman-khoja's followers had stayed in that shed, which was spacious and well built. There was a fruit orchard in front and an irrigation canal nearby. The *ishan*'s courtyard began on the other side of the canal, protected from strange eyes by high clay walls. Fire had burned day and night in two hearths in front of the shed. A lot of people used to come to see the *ishan,* some with rams, others with calves. They did not skimp on gifts for the holy man.

After the revolution, the *ishan* lost his former authority, and his shed stood empty. After a while, it was used as a storeroom where the collective farm kept seed for sowing. Salijan's father, Nartai, stayed in a small building near the shed, where the *ishan*'s guests had washed up, when he guarded the storeroom. During the day he transported farm goods on the cart and in the evening he remained to guard the office.

"That's the way it will have to be, Nartai," the collective

farm chairman told him. "You know yourself that I can't spare another person to guard the storeroom. The office and storeroom aren't very far away. Thank god, our village is quiet. You'll have to watch both places."

One winter night during a blizzard, the quiet village awoke in alarm. The *ishan*'s shed was burning. The fire, fanned by the strong winds, ominously illuminated the entire village. No one knew whether it had happened accidently or if someone who was against the new system had set it. Nartai was found unconscious in his little room. That night everyone except the *ishan*'s sister-in-law, an imbecilic girl who always wore black, fought the fire. As it turned out, Ishan Usman-khoja and his assistant had been delayed at the mosque and realizing it was too late to go home, particularly in such a storm, had remained to spend the night. Seeing the fire in the shed, they had run through the village spreading the alarm. While everyone was gathering, the *ishan*'s assistant himself had dragged Nartai from his room, and began to rub his chest with snow. But the watchman remained unconscious. Two young men carried him home. Despite the cold, the *ishan*'s assistant went to the river, broke a hole in the ice and began to fill pails which were passed from hand to hand. They only managed to put out the blaze early the next morning.

When the chairman came to see Nartai, he was conscious, but in pain, and lay with his eyes closed and his jaw clenched.

"I only remember that I went to that cursed room from the office, and someone hit me on the head," he told the chairman.

"Did you see anyone around the storeroom?" the chairman asked, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"No, I didn't see anyone," Nartai said, shaking his head. "Only the simple one, the *ishan*'s sister-in-law, passed by about an hour before."

Neither Nartai nor the chairman thought anything of that: no one in the village took the demented woman seriously. Even the *ishan* spoke of her as "one of God's creatures without a tongue or thoughts". And it was true, she did not speak to anyone. and no one had even heard her voice. But the voice was nothing — no one had ever seen her face. They only saw her eyes, her mean, little eyes. The rest of her face she covered with a black cloth. There were times when she spent weeks at home without going out. When she had an attack she disappeared from the *ishan*'s house for several days at a time. But since she had done no one any harm, the villagers paid no attention to her senseless wanderings on the outskirts of the village.

So it remained a mystery as to who set fire to the shed. The following spring the storeroom was moved to another building and the burnt shed again stood empty. There was a rumor among the women that the fire had started because they had angered his reverence the *ishan:* they never should have offended Allah's chosen one and taken away his land and shed. But *Ishan* Usman-khoja sharply rebuked the believers for that rumor.

One day after prayers in the mosque, he appealed to the Muslims:

"If it is Allah's will, I am prepared to sacrifice all that I own to the collective farm. My wife and I need only two mats while we are alive."

Then he went on and on, glorifying the collective farm. His assistant, a puny man with sharp, little eyes resembling

two dots, who was sitting in the corner of the mosque, shouted in a high voice:

"Oh, my Benefactor!" and began to kiss the hem of the *ishan*'s robe.

A few other men followed suit.

Several months passed. The village council decided to repair the shed and hold school there while they were constructing a new building. The chairman himself went to the regional center and brought back the necessary supplies. The farmers repaired the roof, and put in new doors and windows. Then the chairman sent a messenger to town to announce that the school was ready. A few days later, for the first time in village history, a teacher arrived. Salijan's father, Nartai, brought her.

Salijan recalled that he had sat on the hill waiting for his father as usual that day. As soon as the cart appeared, he left his friends and ran to meet it. But suddenly, noticing an unfamiliar, fair-haired, blue-eyed woman, he stopped. The woman smoothed down her hair, which had been blown about by the wind, and smiled, squinting her eyes strangely. Nartai motioned to his son to come over and not be afraid.

"This is my son," he said, looking back over his shoulder at the woman.

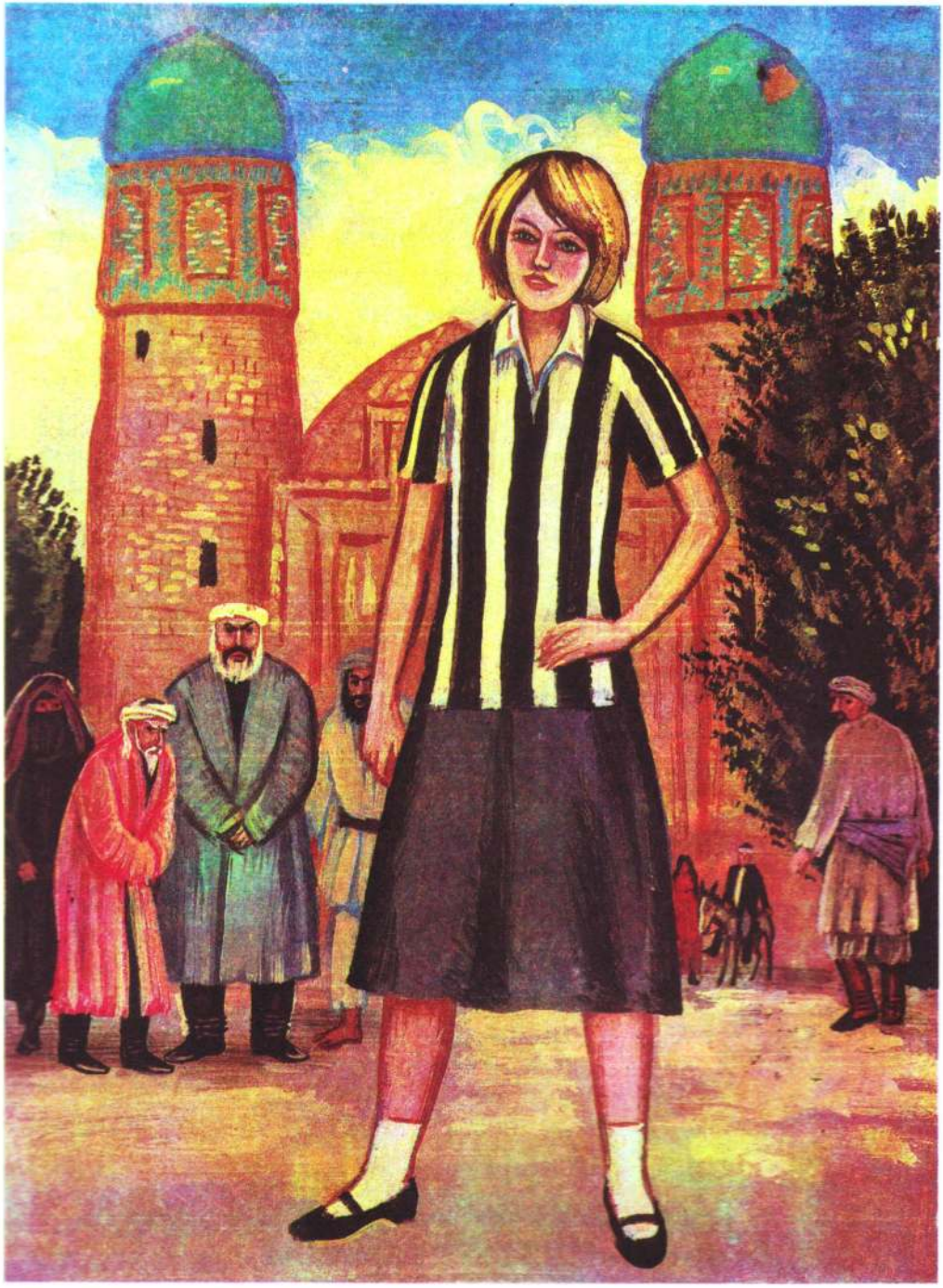
"Oh, I see," she said, and gracefully jumped down from the cart. "That means he will be my first student."

"Absolutely."

"What is your name?" the unfamiliar woman asked, bending toward Salijan, who stood with his head down, blushing in embarrassment.

Finally he stammered out his name.

"Now we are acquainted," she said. "My name is Raissa Maximovna. Let me hear you repeat it."



But no matter how Salijan tried, he could not pronounce her name, and ran away ashamed.

Salijan's mother liked the Russian teacher.

"If you ignore her narrow skirt and short hair, she is a very nice woman," his mother said. "And she knows our language so well! She talks just like an Uzbek. But it is hard for me to pronounce her name. Maybe we'll call her an Uzbek name — Reikhan?"

Nartai laughed.

"Did you hear that?" he asked the teacher. "My wife wants to give you a new name: Reikhan."

Raissa Maximovna smiled, showing even, white teeth.

"I like that name. Reikhan is considered to be a flower of paradise. Nothing wrong with being a flower of paradise, is there?"

After lunch, Raissa Maximovna went to the collective farm office with Nartai, where she was to talk to the chairman about school affairs. On the way, they met *Ishan* Usman-khoja as he was returning from the mosque. On seeing a woman with her head uncovered talking to a man as an equal, he looked intently at her short hair, face and blue eyes, gave an exclamation of shock and displeasure, and hurriedly entered his gate.

Several days later, the *ishan*'s wife announced to the village that while reading the book of revelations, her husband suddenly came upon a passage which stated that the devil can appear in the form of a fair-haired woman.

That evening Salijan waited a long time for his father and the teacher to return, and fell asleep before they appeared. He was awakened by voices, and saw his father and the teacher drinking tea. From their conversation he realized that the *ishan*'s old shed was not to Raissa Maximovna's liking.

"Why does the *ishan* have both an inner and outer courtyard* when there are only three people in his family?" the teacher asked, puzzled.

The farm chairman had recalled the *ishan*'s promise to give the collective farm everything, and hoping he would allow his outer courtyard to be used, at least temporarily for the school, he had taken the teacher and Nartai to see him. When they entered the *ishan* was lying on the *topchan*, and his wife and her demented sister sat beside him. They were drinking tea. When the women saw the unexpected visitors, they left hurriedly. The chairman explained why they had come, but the *ishan* promised nothing, and tried to put them off with vague statements.

Salijan well remembered what Raissa Maximovna said that night: "That demented woman stared at me so maliciously. Her look was cold and full of hatred."

The school opened in the repaired shed. Despite Raissa Maximovna and Nartai's efforts, only two boys showed up the first day: Salijan and Melikuzy.

That morning, when Salijan first got ready to go to school, his mother had broken off some basil.

"Give this to the teacher."

---

* In villages many courtyards are divided into two parts. Various auxiliary buildings were located in the outer courtyard and guests were received there. The women lived in the inner courtyard and strangers were forbidden to enter. — *Ed.*

Chapter VII
GYULNARA

On the second day of school, something happened which neither the teacher nor her two pupils expected: in the distance, along the river, a group of about ten boys and girls formed.

A lanky boy walked in front. Just before reaching the shed, he said something to his companions and they stopped. A girl with large, frightened eyes stood a little to one side. It was the daughter of Mumin, the ploughman, Salijan's neighbor. Her name was Gyulnara.

Raissa Maximovna saw the children through the window and immediately felt anxious, though she tried not to show it. "I wonder why they stopped? What are they afraid of?" Of all the children, only the lanky boy seemed relaxed. Raissa Maximovna recognized him. He was the son of the *ishan's* assistant. The day before she had also learned he was Gyulnara's cousin.

Nartai had been against her going to see Mumin.

"It is better to wait for me and not go there alone. He is a very difficult man."

But Raissa Maximovna had not heeded Nartai's advice, and went to see Mumin.

He lived on the edge of the village. As Raissa Maximovna walked along the crooked, dusty little streets, she felt watchful eyes on her. She was uncomfortable when they peeked at her from behind old clay walls or through slightly opened gates. Not far from Mumin's house she saw a woman carrying a bucket of water. When the woman saw the teacher, she began to run, as if someone was after her. She tripped and fell, splashing water in all directions.

Raissa Maximovna entered Mumin's courtyard through a low gate and gasped, the air was so close. She stopped hesitantly at the gate. The yard was small. There was nowhere one could get out of the sun, if you did not count the tiny patch of shade from the small apricot tree. The owner of the house sat on the veranda with his back to the gate, making something. A huge bull covered with midges lay near the barn.

Gyulnara was mixing manure with her bare feet for *tappi*, which are round manure cakes used to heat the furnace. When she saw the teacher, she froze and her mouth dropped open in surprise. Her mother, a middle-aged woman who was amazingly thin and dark, sat on the ground forming cakes from the manure mash. Suddenly she leaped up in fright.

The expressions on the mother's and daughter's faces were very similar: horror and submissiveness were clearly visible. Mumin looked over his shoulder. His eyes shone angrily, and his fleshy face, covered with thick stubble, twitched. He knit his thick, wide eyebrows, and bore through the teacher with his eyes. Then he growled something in contempt and turned to look at his wife.

"What are you gaping at?" he shouted.

The mother and daughter started, and again returned to work. At that moment the lanky boy appeared on the roof of the barn. Apparently, he had climbed up the clay wall from the street. He stood there for a moment, looking around the yard, then he sat down, hanging his legs over the edge of the roof. He had been following Raissa Maximovna for several days now, like a shadow. The previous day he had thrown a large stone into a puddle just as the teacher walked past, and splashed mud on her. She had noticed him following her as she went to Mumin's as well, but had felt relieved when he fell behind.

Now he had appeared again.

The teacher already had some idea of Mumin from what others had said, but all the same she never thought he would receive her so coldly. The ploughman turned out to be very unsociable. She was even sorry she had come, but she could not back down now, otherwise things would end as a complete defeat for her.

"Salam alaikum!" she greeted him as she walked up to the veranda.

Mumin did not answer. He did not even raise his head. But his shoulders twitched nervously and it was clear he was barely managing to contain himself. Finally he turned to the teacher.

"What do you want?" he asked rudely.

His voice was full of hatred. Raissa Maximovna was taken aback, but she got control of herself and trying to look calm, sat down.

"I'm glad you're home," she said peaceably. "I came to see you about Gyulnara. Will you allow her to come to school tomorrow?"

Mumin was silent, continuing to make a cage for a quail. Two minutes later he put aside his awl.

"You should ask the one who bore her."

But Gyulnara's mother not only remained silent, she was even afraid to look toward the veranda. Meanwhile, Mumin pulled a small sack from under his robe, opened it, and took out a bird. He stroked its head and wings with his rough fingers, touched its feet, brought its beak to his mouth, allowing it to drink his spittle, and then placed it in the new cage. Then he stood up and hung the cage on a nail.

Convinced that she would get nowhere with the man, Raissa

Maximovna started for the gate. When she had almost reached it the bull, which was lying near the barn, stood up and raced forward, dragging the loose end of the chain behind him. He ran to the apricot tree and stopped, as if he did not know where to go from there. Mumin was terrified: he knew the wild nature of the bull and had been injured by him twice. Last year the bull had broken its chain and had almost run him through. He had been bedridden for three months. Whenever he had to tie or untie the bull, he asked one of his neighbors to help. He still regretted not having put a ring through the bull's nose when he was still an obedient calf. And now, staring at the bull standing near the tree, he was truly frightened.

"Run faster!" he shouted, and hurried to the far end of the veranda.

His wife was already in the kitchen. Gyulnara ran after her mother, but slipped and fell. She covered her face with her hands and froze, too terrified to stand up.

The bull turned when the girl screamed. Mumin was about to go inside and hide in case the bull approached the veranda, but seeing his daughter lying on the ground, he stopped.

"Run, run, Gyulnara!" he shouted in despair.

But Gyulnara lay still, too horrified to take her hands from her face. The bull charged. Mumin raced about the veranda in desperation.

"It's your fault, you witch!" he shouted at Raissa Maximovna. "It's all your doing, evil spirit!"

The teacher took several steps toward the veranda.

"Are you referring to me?"

"Who else? Trouble started the minute you came through my gate..."

"The bull untied himself because of me?" Raissa Maximovna

said, unable to control herself any longer. "Don't be ridiculous. Why don't you ask that snotty-nosed boy standing at the gate. I'm sure he knows who is responsible."

Only then did Mumin look at the lanky boy who snickered insolently, and realize it was he who had untied the bull. But for some reason he said nothing.

The bull stood near the apricot tree for a moment, as if trying to understand what the people were arguing about. Then he looked at everyone with his dull eyes, and shook his huge head.

Raissa Maximovna took advantage of the pause, walked back hurriedly, picked up the frightened girl, and pressed her to herself. Staring wildly, the bull began to move back. There was very little space separating him and the two people: he could reach them with one leap.

Mumin's wife screamed and hung helplessly on the door-jamb. The ploughman, shivering as if in a fever, did not know what to do. Finally, he sank helplessly to the floor. Meanwhile, the bull charged Raissa Maximovna who held Gyulnara in her arms.

The teacher stepped behind the apricot tree, and the bull's horns struck the trunk. The bull moved back in order to begin a new attack, and Raissa Maximovna tossed the girl through the veranda railing onto a soft mattress. The bull charged again, this time hitting his head against the tree. He staggered and fell. Raissa Maximovna picked up the free end of the chain and quickly fastened the passive bull to the trunk.

"It would be better if you brought Gyulnara to school tomorrow," she said as she left. "After all, the girl should study."

And she walked out the gate, astonishing Mumin with her imperturbability.

...The children still stood near the shed. Some of them she recognized: she had seen them when she had gone from house to house. She had spent three days visiting everyone, trying to persuade parents to let their children come to school. Why were those children standing there so uncertainly? Were they afraid of someone?

She went out onto the porch. When the lanky boy saw her he pushed Gyulnara for some reason, and then ran away. Salijan was about to go after him, but Raissa Maximovna stopped him. In the distance, under a plane tree, the *ishan*'s demented sister-in-law appeared like a shadow. She stood there for a moment, looking toward the school, and then plunged into a mulberry thicket.

Gyulnara lay face down on the ground. Raissa Maximovna picked her up and brushed off her dress. The little girl stood there for a moment with her finger in her mouth, and then burst out crying and threw her arms around the teacher's neck. Raissa Maximovna hugged her tightly, and stroked her hair. She did not realize that tears were streaming from her eyes as well.

After that incident the number of students in the school increased — four boys and two girls came regularly. But Raissa Maximovna's joy was shortlived.

Chapter VIII
REVENGE, REVENGE, REVENGE

The village was in a terrible uproar: Mumin's daughter left home one morning and disappeared. Her parents said she had started off for school. The collective farm chairman and Raissa

Maximovna went around to all the houses, and searched every ravine and field, but there was no sign of the girl. No one knew what had happened to her. Her father looked for her at the school, but naturally did not find her. When he left the building he fell to the ground and began to writhe.

A large crowd gathered near the shed. No one could calm him. Even the *ishan*'s demented sister-in-law, who did not like large gatherings, stood sullenly to one side, covering half her face with a black shawl. Her mad eyes shone.

Suddenly the crowd parted, allowing the *ishan* to pass. He walked proudly with lumbering steps. His puny assistant followed behind him like a little dog following an elephant. When the *ishan* reached Mumin, the latter wrapped his arms around the holy man's legs.

"God is punishing me, he's punishing me, my Benefactor!"

"It is Allah's will," the *ishan* said in a quiet, tired voice. "He giveth and he taketh away. Allah's slaves have no other consolation than to accept the will of the merciful Almighty."

At that Mumin completely lost control. He began to curse his fate and beat his head against the ground even harder. Someone began to sob. Raissa Maximovna, overhearing the exchange, shuddered involuntarily.

"Stop frightening people, *Ishan*," she said. "Why do you talk as if the girl were dead? Perhaps she is simply lost."

The *ishan* raised his red eyelids and looked at her maliciously. The crowd began to buzz and whisper disapprovingly, and Raissa Maximovna realized she had interfered at the wrong time. She bit her lip and stole a glance at the chairman. He moved toward her, hoping to protect her from the crowd, but

at that moment the unexpected occurred. The *ishan*'s sister-in-law screamed in a terrible voice, and ran off toward the empty lot. It was the first time in many years that people had heard her voice. Everyone, even Mumin and his wife, overwhelmed with grief, were astonished by her inhuman cry.

"Ahhh!" the *ishan* shouted, looking at the fleeing woman. "Mumin's misfortune has touched you too, poor thing! Even you couldn't bear it."

As soon as he said that, his assistant burst out crying, fell on his knees, and grasped the hem of the *ishan's* robe in his teeth. The women took up his cry, and began a lengthy lamentation, as if the little girl was already dead and they were preparing to bury her. The chairman realized it was too late to avert the crowd's fury.

Meanwhile Mumin stood up and moved toward Raissa Maximovna. On seeing that he pulled an axe from his belt, the crowd immediately stepped back. After taking a few steps he stopped.

Both he and Raissa Maximovna stood motionless, staring at one another. Mumin's eyes gleamed maliciously.

From that day on one calamity followed another. The next evening, as Nartai was returning from town, the bridge did not hold and he and his cart and horse fell into the river. The wooden piles supporting it had completely rotted through. Nartai was trapped under his cart and drowned.

After the death of her husband, Salijan's mother was taken ill. Her brother came from town. He wanted to take his sister and nephew back with him so Salijan could study and his sister could recover her weakened health, but the poor woman was not fated to see the city.

One night she woke her son, who slept on a rug at the

head of her bed. Salijan got up, lit a lamp, and the two of them were silent for a long time. His mother stroked her son's head with her weak hands, and her look was clear and fixed. She began to speak in a soft, very calm voice, as if she were not sick at all.

"Son, I don't know where fate will take you," she said. "I don't know what path Allah will choose for you. Even there I will pray for you. Pray that you are happy and that you have friends and good people around you."

Salijan could not take his eyes off his mother's face. There was a lump in his throat, and no matter how he tried, he could not swallow it. He burst out crying. His uncle, who was sleeping on the *topchan* in the yard, woke up and came to sit next to his dying sister.

After his mother's death, Salijan could not remain at home. Everything reminded him of his parents. The *ishan*'s wife announced that their house was cursed by god. Salijan could not stay for another reason: there was nothing for him to do in the village. The school had been closed and the teacher had disappeared. There was a rumor in the village that she was responsible for little Gyulnara's disappearance and had run off to town.

Salijan decided to leave the village and go live with his uncle in town. The chairman tried to talk him out of it.

"You are as dear to me as Melikuzy," he said. "Stay and you will be my second grandson."

But Salijan did not agree. He had suffered too much the last few days. When at home, he felt that his father and mother would walk in the room at any moment. In the morning, he felt that his mother was sitting at the head of his bed. The feeling was so real he was afraid to open his eyes. He began to lose weight

and became listless and morose. There was nothing the chairman could do but agree to let him go. He gave the boy a horse and cart to transport his things. Initially he planned to send someone with Salijan, but then decided against it: there was only one road leading from the village into town and there was no way the boy could get lost. And Salijan had gone into town with Melikuzy when there were not enough adults to go. In other words, the chairman had no reason to be concerned.

Salijan gathered his things together in two bundles. He did not forget the bag of basil seeds which his mother had loved so. He started out before dawn, but new troubles were waiting for him on the way.

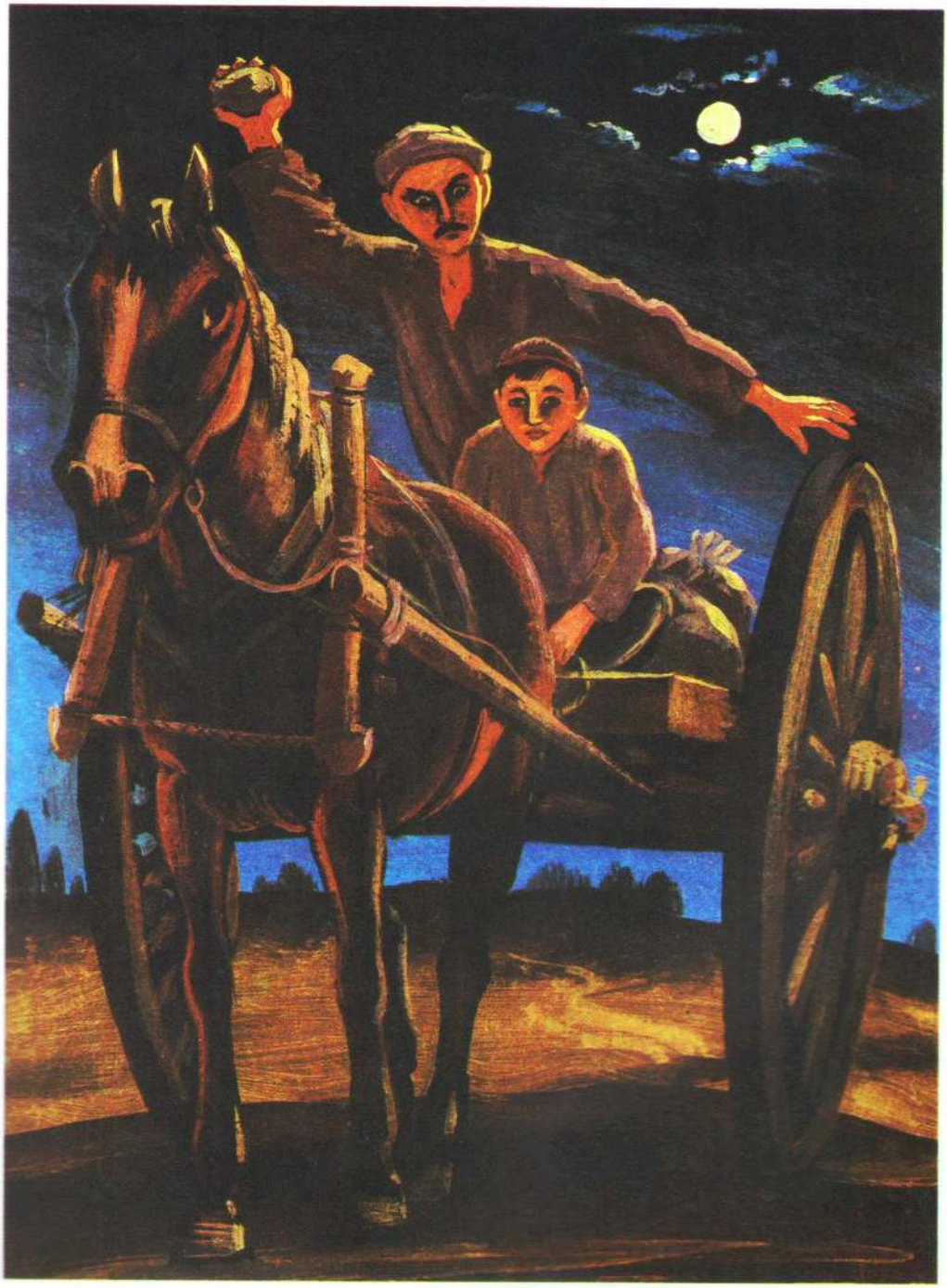
* * *

Salijan told all this to Shakhlo.

"I don't know how this happened but another misfortune fell upon me," he continued after a pause.

"But why?" Shakhlo said unable to contain herself. "After all, you..."

"I don't know. If you remember there is a road in the village just beyond the river. Maybe it isn't there any longer, but it was then. It didn't begin at the bridge, but a little further upriver, at the ford. It united with the one from the bridge beyond the village. I crossed the river at the ford, and as soon as I had gone half a mile, I met a man. He asked for a ride and I agreed. We rode in silence. Then he hit me on the head with something, and I fell off the cart. When I regained consciousness I was lying at the bottom of a ditch and the sky was still full of stars. I lay there for a while since my head felt like lead and



I couldn't lift it. I didn't know where I was or what had happened. I finally raised myself on my elbows and then stood up. I looked all around but didn't see the cart or the horse. I was very frightened. I walked toward town and soon found the horse and cart with all my things. I could have continued on into town or gone back to the village, but there was no sense in returning. I somehow managed to climb up in the cart and drove the rest of the way into town. When I got to my uncle's and told what had happened, no one believed me. They couldn't imagine anyone striking a young boy. They said I must have fallen from dizziness. What could I do if they didn't want to believe me." Salijan fell silent. "But this time there is no doubt."

He looked at Shakhlo. The girl opened her eyes wide.

"Do you think someone hit you this time too?"

"Perhaps. Anything can happen," he said hurriedly. "But the strangest thing is that one of the burners was on, and I clearly remember I did not touch it. What happened?"

"I don't know," Shakhlo said, and she shivered.

Until then, she had not known Salijan's past. He was their neighbor and a teacher in the school, and often came by to talk to her father. But they would not have had that kind of conversation anyway. Salijan was an adult, while she was still a girl. She would not have dared to ask him about his past.

Their present conversation had begun spontaneously. That morning, when Shakhlo had come to straighten up a bit, he had asked about her departure for the village. She had told him that she was leaving early the next day, before the sun got too hot. Salijan had said nothing and begun to pace the yard. And then, while they were drinking tea, he had begun to talk. Initially Shakhlo had not understood what prompted him to

speak, but then Salijan had looked at a branch of basil lying on the table.

"Whenever I see basil I think of my mother and my first teacher, Raissa Maximovna," he said.

He knew very little of the village today. He had lost touch after he left to go to town, and had never met any of his fellow villagers after that. Three months before, he had sent a letter to the village, telling of himself, his parents, when he had left, and inquiring about Raissa Maximovna and the children he studied with (there were only three of them). He also wrote that he was collecting material for a book about the first schools in the republic. A short time ago he had received an answer: "The people you seek have not lived in the village for years, and we can give you no information." The letter had been dropped in the mailbox, but had not been posted. There was not even an envelope, just a piece of paper. Someone had probably come from the village on business and dropped off the letter.

Salijan got the paper and handed it to Shakhlo. It was a page from a school notebook, written in precise handwriting which slanted slightly to the left.

"The end of the letter 'k' loops strangely," Shakhlo commented, not knowing what else to say.

"You're right. I noticed that too," Salijan smiled sadly. "I have a favor to ask of you, though I don't have much hope. Will you ask around when you get to the village? Maybe someone is still there after all."

Shakhlo agreed.

The following day she took the bus to the village.

Chapter IX
THE VISITOR

Munira woke up in the morning from a strange rustling. Raising her head slightly, she saw that the bed next to her was empty. "Where could Shakhlo be?" she thought. "Maybe she got cold sleeping in the yard and went inside."

"Shakhlo! Where are you?" she called.

"What?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm over here." Shakhlo came out from behind the trunk of an old nut tree which grew near the wall. She pointed to the neighboring yard, and then brought her finger to her lips.

"Shhhh!"

She was holding a large broom in her hand. Munira was very surprised: what was she going to do, sweep the yard? It was still early. Meanwhile, Shakhlo squatted near the wall. Munira was now totally awake. She sat up, grasped her knees, and watched her friend with interest. A few minutes later, Shakhlo tiptoed over and sat down on the edge of the *topchan.*

"It's him," she said angrily.

"Who?" Munira asked in bewilderment.

"Do you remember the boy who pestered us? He's here!"

"Oh, you mean Anzor."

Shakhlo looked suspiciously at the wall and nodded.

"Well, what if he is?"

"He's peeking over the wall."

"What?"

"He's spying on us," Shakhlo said tensely. She was annoyed at her friend's slowness. "I opened my eyes and saw him looking

at us. I always feel it when someone is staring at me."

"Why didn't you say so right away," Munira laughed. She leaped up and began to gather the sheets and blankets. "He lives next door! Did you think he came here especially to spy?"

Shakhlo also smiled, threw the broom on the ground and slipped her feet into her sandals. Then she took her towel off the branch of the peach tree and went to wash up.

"What were you going to do with the broom?" Munira asked.

"I was going to hit him on the head if he looked again."

Munira laughed. As soon as Anzor's head appeared over the wall, she shouted:

"Did you hear that, Anzor? Right on the head!"

Anzor did not answer. He looked coldly at Shakhlo, shook his fist at Munira, and disappeared.

After breakfast, the girls put on overalls and left the house. Anzor was riding by on his nimble donkey. Apparently, he was again going to see his father in the collective farm orchards. All the other young people had been working on the gym for several days, but Anzor had not come once. Munira tried not to think about him. Once when she met him on the street, she had asked him to join them. As soon as he heard her he had paled.

"Listen, will you lay off?"

"Am I bothering you?" she had asked in surprise.

"What am I going to do in your gym? You need it to jump around in, but not me. You got that?"

Munira had never seen him like that: he was shaking all over and his tiny, piercing eyes narrowed so that they disappeared. He was hurt. Munira could not say a word she was so taken aback. When he limped away, she had watched him for a long time, feeling sorry for him. Why had she talked about the gym and reminded Anzor of his defect?

Now she understood why he had gotten so angry at Askar when he had thoughtlessly joked at his expense. But they were not only working for themselves in building the gym. They would finish school in a few years, but the gym would remain. No, Anzor shouldn't cut himself off from the others.

And she still could not forget his prank when he almost shamed her in front of the others at the river. What would have happened if he had run off with her clothes? It was a good thing Shakhlo helped. She and Shakhlo had barely known each other then. They hadn't had time to make friends yet...

* * *

That day all the young people had gathered. Usmanali, their home room teacher, looked very happy. They were waiting for the chairman. Before ten minutes had passed, one of the boys shouted:

"Here comes Muminjan!"

Everyone looked down the road and saw the chairman on his white horse. The teacher walked out to meet him. Muminjan could not hide a smile. He was grateful to the young people who were so eager to get to work. He stroked his moustache and looked at them.

"Let's come to an agreement right away. Either we decide to work to the end, or we part ways. It's better to back out now than after the work has started."

"We won't quit," the young people answered. The chairman's words hurt them a little. "We have made up our minds."

"I was kidding, really. Just kidding. Usmanali, you are leaving, aren't you?"

"I have no choice," the teacher said. "I would stay, but I have to take my exams."

"A pity," the chairman commented. "Though I wish you luck and hope you make straight As. When are you leaving?"

"This evening."

"Have a safe journey. Just don't forget to pick your replacement. He should be a dependable person."

"I have picked Ravshan."

"Maybe the others want someone else," Muminjan said.

"No, let Ravshan be it," the other students answered.

The chairman smiled in embarrassment. No matter who the young people had chosen as their leader, he had to know about it. Just as he was aware that Usmanali studied by correspondence at the university and must go take his exams.

Askar stepped forward. He was wearing a shirt three sizes too big which hung on him. His sleeves were rolled up and he had on old pants and large boots.

"May I ask a question?" he turned to the chairman boldly.

"Certainly, son," the chairman said, looking at him with interest.

"I wanted to..." Askar suddenly faltered. The chairman was listening to him attentively, as if he were an adult. Sensing that he shouldn't hesitate any longer, he blurted out all at once:

"Do you remember the time you did not trust us?"

"When was that, son?" the chairman asked in surprise.

"When we planted seedlings along the road," Askar reminded him. "If you give us more cement, you'll see how we can work."

He looked at the others, expecting support, but they all were silent. Askar was afraid he had said something wrong. It sure

looked like it since all the kids got so quiet all of a sudden. Usmanali stole a glance at the chairman.

Ravshan whispered something to Munira, but she did not hear him. She was wondering why Askar had brought up the subject of the trees. But contrary to what everyone thought the chairman did not get angry and even praised Askar.

"Good for you, right to the point," he said. "What is your name?"

"Askar."

"Who is your father?"

"Jumankul."

"Ahh, our shepherd who is away at the pasture. Come over here, I have a job for you," the chairman said. "Are you his youngest son?"

Askar nodded.

"That's fine. Actually, I have two jobs for you, if you think you can handle them."

"Tell me what they are and I'll be glad to help if I can."

"I heard there is wonderful sand in the river running through the pasture lands. Find out from your father if that is true. If it is, then I'll give you a truck and two workmen to load it."

"My father and I will do it."

"Fine," the chairman agreed. "And one more request." He stopped and looked at Ravshan. "How is our visitor doing?"

"Still sleeping, Dad," the boy laughed. "You could fire a cannon and she wouldn't wake up."

"Really?" the chairman smiled. "Let her sleep," he thought to himself. "City children aren't like ours. She isn't used to the fresh air, and she's tired from her trip." He again turned to Askar. "We have a visitor from town. Would you show her the pasturelands? She has never seen a real pasture."

"Where could she see one in the city?"

"So we have agreed," the chairman said. "You'll show her."

"Of course," Askar promised, flattered that Muminjan had assigned him two such important tasks.

The chairman turned to the others.

"Today you should clear the area of debris. And don't forget to take off two or three rows of bricks from the old foundation. We'll replace them with new bricks since they are already broken and crumbling."

He stayed with the young people awhile and then rode off on his white horse. A lot could be accomplished with their help if only they did not run out of steam and quit. But it looked like he could depend on them.

Then he remembered that Mulladost was not too happy with the young people's venture. Why? True, Mulladost did not have anything definite against the construction of the gym, but he had said, as if in passing: "It seems to me we should wait. Can you trust children with something so important? I'm afraid they'll quit before the job is finished." The chairman had explained that the farm's construction workers would be doing the major work, and the young people would help by carrying bricks or water, for example. At that point, Mulladost had not raised an objection and they had not spoken of it again. But nevertheless, the chairman was puzzled by one thing: as soon as they had begun to lay the foundation, Mulladost started to fuss and worry, as if... But when the work remained unfinished and the bricklayers were sent to another building, he again grew calm as before. Why was that?

The gym was being built in the empty lot next to Mulladost's old house. Ravshan jokingly called the house and courtyard

the only architectural monument left from the old village. But the gym would not bother Mulladost and his aunt. There was still a relatively wide strip of land between the gym and Mulladost's yard. In fact, you could drive a truck through. To tell the truth, the chairman had plans for that land too, once the main building was finished. It would be a perfect spot to build a dressing room and showers. But why was Mulladost so upset? Was he afraid the children's noise would disturb his sick aunt? They were both strange, you had to admit. Numerous times they had been offered new, well-built farm houses, but they refused to move. They did not want to leave the former *ishan*'s old hovel, though the place was falling apart. Fortunately for them, there had not been any downpours lately.

After the chairman left, the young people began to talk noisily. They had to decide who would do what. They had just begun to deliberate when Mulladost's gate opened. His demented aunt peeked out, but immediately hid behind the gate and shut it tightly. They did not even get a good look at her.

Mirkabul and Nartaji were sent for wood and the samovar. The girls began to pick up the trash, while the boys started to remove the top layer of bricks from the foundation.

When everything was picked up, Ozoda asked Ravshan where they should throw the trash.

Ravshan put down his hoe and thought for a minute. That was the first question to him as leader, and he wanted to make the right decision.

"There is a hole over there," Munira said, and pointed to a large pit where clay had been dug out some time before.

Ravshan nodded in agreement. Then he and Mirsalim grabbed a barrow to move the bricks out of the way. The girls were about to dump the trash in the hole, but Askar stopped them.

"Hey, wait! You can't throw it in there!"

"Why not?"

"What are we going to do when they bring the cement? The hole will come in handy for storing it. You need to use your heads a little."

The girls turned to Askar. He sat calmly in the shade of a small elm with his legs tucked under him. Ozoda and Munira threw the barrow down right under his nose.

"What are you doing?"

"Just sitting here," Askar said, wrinkling his brow and striking himself on the head. "All kinds of thoughts are running through my head. Have you ever tried to solve even one problem?"

"Where are your thoughts running?" Ozoda asked mischievously.

"To the pasture."

"Oh, to the pasture!" she exclaimed. "Are they grazing there?"

"That's enough," Askar retorted. He was really in no mood for jokes. "Can't you understand what I'm thinking about? Didn't you hear what the chairman told me?"

"Of course we heard. We're not deaf, you know."

"But you didn't understand a thing," Askar sighed deeply. "If the chairman said I was to take his guest to the pasture, then she must be more important than all our work, right? You tell me where I can take such an honored guest, someone so important that the construction can wait? To the crystal clear spring? To the silver juniper thicket?" Askar looked at Munira and added: "If only it were spring, and the guest was a girl who goes crazy over tulips, like you. Then I could take her wherever her heart desired."

At first, Ozoda thought Askar was joking as usual. But now she realized he was really worried. Only she could not understand why he was so upset over some visitor. What was so hard about that? He'd take her to the pasture, show her around, and then return. It wasn't worth all the worry.

"Ravshan, come here," Munira called. "Listen to Askar."

Ravshan turned. Seeing Askar surrounded by girls, he waved his arm as if to say he didn't have time for their banter. But he was interested. He knew Askar was witty, so he went over.

"Listen, don't stop now. We've hardly begun."

Askar again struck himself on the forehead.

"First listen to Askar," Ozoda said laughing.

"He's going crazy over your father's requests," Munira added. "At least explain to him."

Ravshan did not understand what they were talking about. He looked at Askar.

"Obviously the visitor is more important than the gym," Askar began to explain again. "The visitor will be pampered at the crystal spring while we ... while I follow her around on all fours like a dog. What if her feet hurt after walking up and down hills?.."

Askar could have gone on and on, but Ravshan interrupted him:

"Get up, you idiot! Why are you making such a fuss over the visitor and where did you come up with those crazy ideas? I don't understand what you are talking about? The visitor is not lazy like you and doesn't loll around in the shade of a tree. Look at her work!"

Everyone immediately turned their heads in the direction Ravshan pointed.

"Why, that's Shakhlo!" one of them shouted.

A girl in pants and a straw hat was carrying bricks on a barrow with Melikuza. Askar leaped up as if he had been stung, and to avoid hearing his friends' laughter, ran to the other end of the field where he immediately picked up a shovel and got to work. Ozoda was curious and walked over to the new girl. Munira also moved toward her but stopped halfway. "She's gotten so pretty," she thought.

A short time later she and Shakhlo became better acquainted.

After the young people had lunch, sharing what they had brought from home, Munira had the urge to go swimming in the river. She tried to talk Ozoda into going with her, but her friend refused, saying she was too tired. None of the other girls wanted to go either — they were exhausted from the unaccustomed work. Ravshan tried to persuade Munira not to go, but she did not listen to him, picked up a towel and headed for the river.

Munira knew a quiet place, about four hundred meters beyond the large, cement bridge, where the entire shore was thickly overgrown with bushes. She always swam there.

She pushed through the bushes and took off her dress. But she did not feel like going in the cold water immediately so she sat in the grass for a while. Then, seeing Anzor walking along the bank toward her, she dove in the water and swam against the current. When she grew tired, she relaxed and let the river carry her back. When she was even with the spot where she had left her clothes, she grabbed some roots sticking up out of the water and climbed out on the bank. Suddenly she heard a branch snap to the left. She tensed. Somebody was coming toward her through the bushes.

"Who's there?" she shouted.

The rustling stopped. "Probably a dog," she thought. But suddenly the branches of a bush parted and someone stood up. Munira was so frightened she dove in the water. When she came up for air she saw Anzor sitting on the bank.

"What's the big idea scaring people?" she said angrily. "What are you doing here? No one invited you."

Anzor snickered in response. He stretched his legs out in front of him, making himself more comfortable. Munira noticed he was holding her dress.

"Put that down!"

"All right," he said. He stood up. "I'll hang it on the branch of the old plane tree."

"Stop!"

"Is there something you want to say?"

"Leave my dress where you found it!" Munira hit the water with her hands. "Leave it or I'll call for help."

Anzor laughed and sat back down.

"Go ahead," he said. "But no matter how much you yell, your Ravshan won't hear you."

Munira was shocked at his words, and blinked rapidly.

"What did you say?"

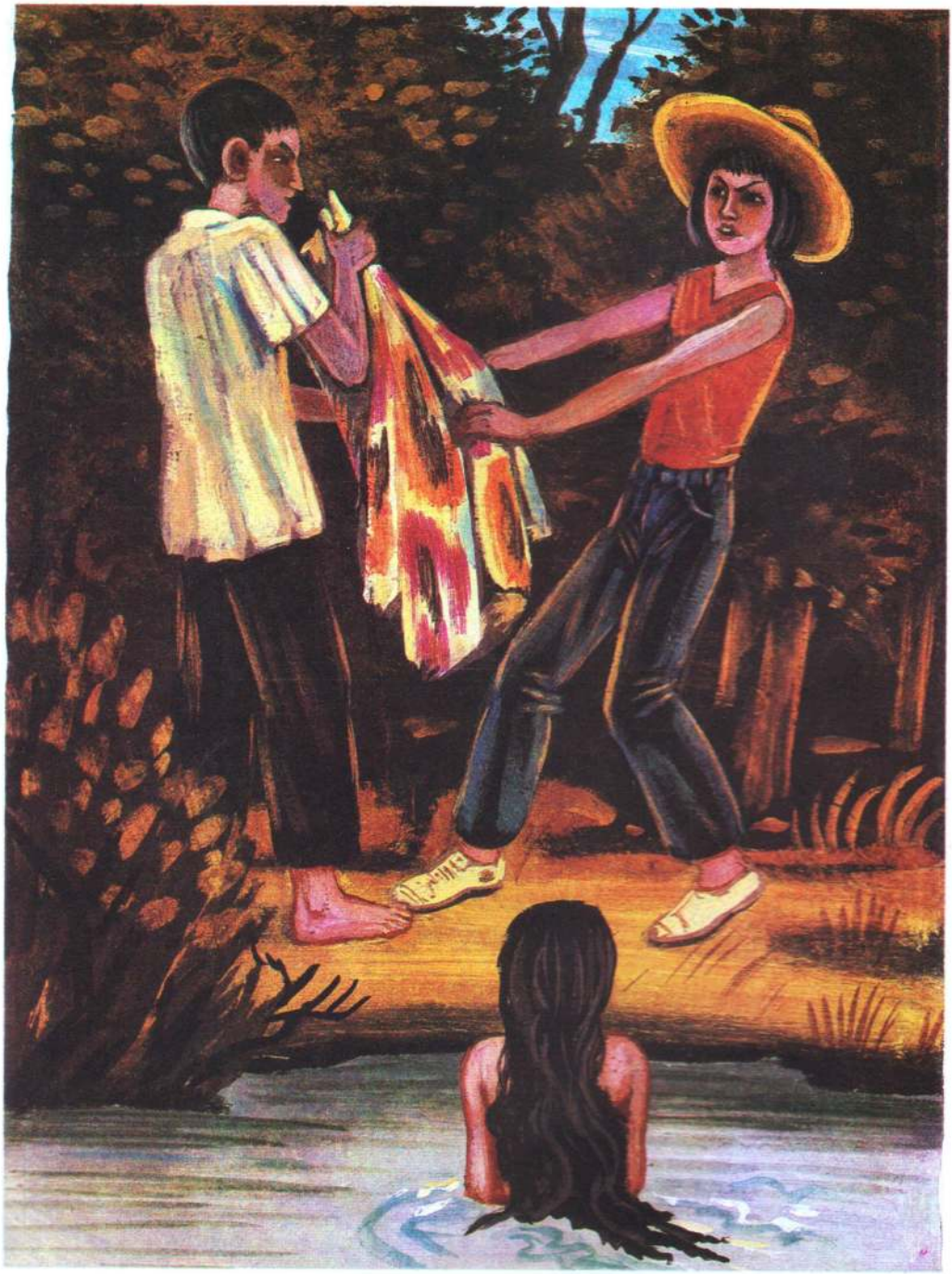
"You heard me."

"Repeat it one more time."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" Anzor asked. "Don't the two of you sit on the hill in the evening, like Romeo and Juliet? I've seen you myself."

"How nasty you are!" Munira was hurt. She wanted to cry. "Don't be so unpleasant, Anzor."

"Who's unpleasant?" Anzor's little eyes narrowed. He stood up, shaking all over. He was about to say something when steps were heard behind the bushes.



Anzor paled. Turning, he saw a girl coming towards him and he froze like a little boy in front of a camera.

"Do you see that fool, Shakhlo?" Munira shouted through her tears.

Shakhlo looked at Anzor for a minute, and then walked right up to him.

"Give it to me."

"Who are you and what do you want the dress for?"

"And what do you want it for?" Shakhlo asked smiling. "Are you going to put it on?" She laughed and yanked the dress out of his hands.

Because it all happened so fast, Anzor lost his head and raised his fist, forgetting it was a girl in front of him. Shakhlo did not wait for him to hit her and pushed him with all her might. He lost his balance and fell into the water.

Munira scrambled up on the bank, put on her dress, and the two girls hurried away. After making sure they were not being followed, they stopped to rest.

"You dropped out of the sky, and just in the nick of time," Munira said.

"No, I came from under the ground," Shakhlo said, laughing.

Munira looked at her. "She is really brave," she thought. But Shakhlo did not notice Munira's grateful look.

"Why is he so rude?" Shakhlo asked, as they walked.

"He is always that way. He's a little strange," Munira said. "Shakhlo, please don't tell the others about what happened. Not even Ravshan."

They stopped on the hill near the large bridge, and Shakhlo looked around interestedly. Yes, that was the same hill Salijan had talked about. And you really could see half the village

from there. It was amazing to think that Salijan had been as young as the little boys lying on the hot sand. Did Salijan really sun himself there?

For Munira, the hill was associated with other memories: she again saw the tulips which shone so brightly in the rising sun.

"Let's go, Shakhlo," she said quietly.

Along the way Munira suddenly thought about asking Shakhlo to stay at her house when her mother was on duty in the hospital. But what would Ravshan's parents say? After all, Shakhlo was their guest. Munira could ask Ozoda too, but she had little brothers and helped her mother take care of them. She should talk to Ravshan. Yes, that would be best. Then Ravshan could talk to his parents. Munira was not afraid to be home alone, but her mother worried. Sometimes she would hurry home late at night to check on her daughter. Once Munira even got angry. "Why do you do that, Mama?" she asked. "It's so far for you to walk, and at night." Her mother had answered that it made her feel better.

"Shakhlo, would you like to spend the night with me?" she asked at last. "My mother always worries when I'm home alone."

Shakhlo agreed immediately.

"That's a wonderful idea," she said. "What can I talk to Ravshan about — he has his boy problems. With you it will be more fun. But I'll visit Muminjan and his wife every day. Otherwise, they will be offended."

And so it was settled. When Munira's mother was on night duty at the hospital, Shakhlo spent the night with her. They quickly became close friends.

Chapter X
AT THE CONSTRUCTION SITE

The truck with cement pulled up and Mulladost jumped down from the cab. He was wearing a silk scarf wound around his skull-cap. He began to pace back and forth with small steps, and then stopped and looked toward the young people, shading his eyes with his little hand. After the dust that the truck had stirred up settled, he finally found who he was looking for. His face lit up.

"Hey, Ravshan!" he shouted. "Come here!"

Ravshan was glad to see him. That man could help them. "It's a good thing he showed up," Ravshan thought. "We need an older person's advice. We can't manage without it."

"How are things, Ravshan?" Mulladost asked with his characteristic concern. "You aren't tired yet?"

"Why should we be tired?" the boy laughed. "We haven't even begun to really work."

"You are very modest," Mulladost smiled. "I think highly of you for that."

He clapped his small hands on the teenager's broad, boney shoulders, looked into his tan face, and then continued with the same note of concern in his voice:

"Don't overwork yourself, Ravshan. Better to exploit those young people over there. A leader should never work himself, he only needs to be the first to roll up his sleeves and to inspire others. In other words, he should show how to work, but he doesn't have to work himself. That is how it is done, Ravshan. And now call your crew together."

"What do you need them for? Let them work."

"There's a job to be done, Ravshan. Do you think I would call them away from useful work for no reason? I have something for them to do."

"Everyone come over here!" Ravshan shouted.

The young people were piling the bricks in neat pyramids near the foundation so it would be easier to pass them to the bricklayers later. They stopped and walked over to Ravshan. Mulladost got a stack of paper sacks from the cab and began to give them out.

"These are for cement," he explained. "Otherwise, it will get blown away in the wind. The best thing is to store it in these bags."

The dump truck driver grew angry.

"Why make them do that? Let the young people continue what they were doing and I'll dump the cement and be off."

But Mulladost remained firm. He even scolded the driver for his lack of concern for materials.

"I don't want a gram of cement lost," he emphasized.

Ravshan liked his stubbornness. He told the others to fill the sacks right in the truck. Everyone got busy. Mulladost, convinced that his advice was being taken, took a small bundle from the cab and headed for home. About that time, Askar, who had been sent to the farm for the bricklayers, returned.

"Did you tell them we've got the cement?" Ravshan asked.

"They're on their way," Askar said, and turned to the others who were pouring cement into the paper sacks, raising clouds of dust and sneezing. At that moment they were swarming all over the truck, resembling diligent ants.

"You ought to use your heads and not waste time in useless activity," Askar said.

"What are you talking about?" the others asked.

"Nothing. I just wondered what fool thought up those paper bags."

"And what do you suggest?" Ravshan asked, as he threw a bag from his shoulder.

"Do you really plan to put all that cement in paper bags?" Askar asked. "Have you all gone crazy? There are several tons of cement. And someone will have to answer for all the time the truck sits here." Askar pointed to the hole which they had cleaned out the day before. "There's a place that's all ready. That's where the cement should be unloaded."

The driver perked up immediately, took off his hat, shook the dust off, and put it back on.

"Where were you before, my boy?" he asked. "That's the way to work. Real sensible," and he leaped up on the footboard of the truck.

"How can you unload cement directly on the ground?" Ravshan asked.

"Don't worry, the cement won't catch cold," Askar said. "The main thing is that it stays dry."

"Askar is right!" Ozoda exclaimed, and was the first to jump down from the truck.

The others followed her example. Ravshan found himself in an awkward position: he wanted to object but the driver had already started up the motor. The truck moved forward, and stopped sharply at the edge of the hole. The driver stuck his head out of the cab and carefully pushed the handle of the dumpster.

"Hey, come here!" he called to Shakhlo, as soon as he had unloaded the cement.

She went over.

"Where did that little man go?"

"Who?" Shakhlo asked, not understanding.

"What's his name ... the former tea-room keeper. Go knock on that door," the driver said, pointing to the old house enclosed by the clay wall. "I think he went in there. I'm in a big hurry, so get him for me please."

"All right, I'll be right back."

Shakhlo ran to the old gate and pushed, but it was closed on a hook. Since the driver was in a hurry, she did not bother to knock but simply pushed the gate again and the hook came off. The gate opened with a squeak. She hurried in and stopped in surprise: the courtyard was terribly shabby and uncared for, nothing like the other yards in the village. It was little, and bare without one plant. Bundles of wood lined the clay wall. A flue stuck up on the roof of the shed — but no, it was not a shed but the kitchen. And both the roof and the flue were entwined with grapevines. Strange, there wasn't anything growing in the yard, but there were grapevines ripening on the roof. Then Shakhlo realized that the grapevines grew from behind the clay wall, and had simply reached the roof and wound around the flue. She saw another low, carved door, just like those in museums. Apparently, there was another yard, an inner one, as they used to call it. She walked over and grasped the brass ring on the door. Suddenly she heard snatches of conversation:

"The same person?" Mulladost's voice asked.

"Yes... As if we didn't have enough problems," another answered.

Then she heard a dry cough and the conversation ended.

She pushed the carved door, but it was bolted. "Why are both doors locked?" she wondered. She knocked. Steps were heard on the other side of the door.

"Who's there?" Mulladost asked. His voice was soft and cautious.

"The driver wants to see you."

Mulladost still did not open the door, but peered through a crack.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Shakhlo," she said, though she was not sure he had heard about her.

"The chairman's guest?"

"Yes," she said aloud. "He knows," she thought.

"You haven't unloaded the truck already, have you?"

"We unloaded the cement into a hole instead of putting it in the bags," she said.

"What?"

"We unloaded it in a hole," she repeated. "It's better that way."

"A pity," Mulladost said quietly after a pause. "All right, go on. I'll be right there."

Shakhlo returned to her new friends.

Ravshan, flushed, was tossing bricks to Askar so fast the latter barely had time to catch them. Ravshan frowned sullenly at him from time to time. It was as if he was sorry Askar kept up with him. But Askar acted as if he did not notice Ravshan's angry look. He caught the bricks and passed them to Munira and Ozoda who piled them in neat stacks. Ravshan persisted and began to tease Askar: Wasn't he tired? Catching bricks wasn't like catching flies.

"That's enough, Ravshan," Munira said frowning. "Why are you pouting? Askar was right."

"Who's pouting?"

"You are," Munira flared up. "So what if the cement was

unloaded in the hole instead of being put in sacks? Are you any worse off for it?"

"No. I'm just fine as usual."

"I can see that!"

Ravshan waved his hand angrily, and bent down to pick up a brick. At that instant Askar noticed Shakhlo leaving Mulladost's gate.

"Hey, what are you doing over there?" he shouted.

"Where?" Shakhlo asked, not understanding.

"At the tea-room keeper's, where else! He's..." Askar made a gesture with his hand. "Come over here."

Shakhlo, still bewildered, walked over to Askar.

"Are you in one piece and unharmed?" he asked meaningfully.

Shakhlo was surprised and a little hurt, thinking he was making fun of her.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Shakhlo," Munira said.

"Praise be to Allah," Askar whispered ominously. "Thank him that you are in one piece and unharmed, for the good of our project. But don't go to that house again. The person who lives there may not be a witch, but she's not much better."

"Why shouldn't I go there?"

Askar did not have time to answer. Ravshan tossed him a brick but he was so involved in conversation he did not notice. The brick struck his leg. He moaned and sat down. Ravshan had not expected something like that to happen. A moment before he had been mad at Askar, and that was why he had been throwing the bricks so fast, but he had not meant to hurt him.

"Does it hurt a lot?" he asked, squatting in front of Askar.

"No," Askar said through clenched teeth. "It feels quite pleasant."

"Don't be sarcastic."

"What am I supposed to do, thank you?"

"You were the one not paying attention."

"Are you satisfied now?" Munira said to Ravshan. She felt sorry for Askar. "You got your revenge."

Ravshan was taken aback.

"You should have looked," Shakhlo said. "Didn't you see he wasn't ready?"

"I didn't do it on purpose," Ravshan said, and hung his head.

While the pain in his leg had not subsided, Askar tried to act cheerful in front of the girls, and forced his lips into something resembling a smile.

"It's nothing, Shakhlo, everything will be fine. I've got to take you to the pasture, you know. And I will, even if I have to crawl."

Shakhlo was embarrassed. "He sure has a way with words," she thought. Munira winked slyly at Askar, and the discomfort among the young people vanished into thin air. Ravshan put his hand on Askar's shoulder and was about to apologize when Mulladost came out of his gate and called to him.

"Hey, nephew!"

The tea-room keeper had a habit of calling whomever he was well disposed to or fawning up to "nephew".

"Why don't you answer?" Askar said. "Your uncle is calling, you should respond."

Ravshan pulled his hand from Askar's shoulder as if a snake had bitten him. The driver climbed into the cab, shaking his head at Ravshan for his carelessness.

But Mulladost was in no hurry to leave. He asked about the cement in detail and then raised his thin eyebrows severely:

"You should have put it in the bags. Then the incident with

the shepherd's son would never have happened." He circled the hole, and after a pause, repeated: "Should have put it in the sacks. Now it's too late. If you've already done it, you need to think about the consequences."

"You're right," Ravshan nodded.

It was as if he wanted to say that if the cement had been put in the bags, the brick he himself had thrown would not have hit Askar in the leg. The others were obviously disappointed in him.

"Come over here, nephew," Mulladost said as he took Ravshan by the arm. "You ought to send that clever fellow home to the pasture, or have him make the tea," he whispered in the teenager's ear. "Your father might get angry if he hears of his pranks. You know he can't stand it when someone is so careless in work."

"All right," Ravshan agreed. He was ashamed that Mulladost was fawning on him like that.

"Anzor will bring two pails of grapes for lunch. I'm leaving now. And that scamp should be punished. If there is a wind, all the cement will blow away."

"All right, all right," Ravshan agreed hurriedly. He was afraid the others would overhear.

"Askar, why don't you go home and rest," he said after Mulladost left. "Tomorrow you have to go to the pasture."

Askar seemed not to have heard him.

"Then go make the tea," Ravshan suggested. "It will be lunchtime soon."

Askar had to agree. His leg hurt and it was hard for him to walk. Hobbling toward the samovar, he nevertheless continued to joke.

"Now no one will notice that Anzor isn't here. I can easily substitute for him."

The others laughed at his forced joke. Munira was especially sorry for him. At that moment Ravshan, the same Ravshan who she had always liked, seemed a stranger, unpleasant. He kept trying to catch her eye while they worked, but she acted as if she did not notice. At lunch, she joked with everyone, including the non-talkative Narkuzy, but she did not look at Ravshan, as if he did not exist.

Ravshan could not understand how she could change so fast. In all honesty, it was Ravshan who should be mad at Askar. Did Munira really think it was his fault? He did not sit around doing nothing, but worked just like everyone else, and look where it got him. He had always thought Askar was a good-natured fellow, but it turned out he was only putting on an act. He was no fool, and did everything he could to cause Ravshan trouble. But why? In school things were simpler: they came in the morning, sat five or six hours and then went calmly home. Apparently, you only really got to know someone at work, not in the classroom.

The thing that made Ravshan the angriest was Munira's coldness. Yesterday she had constantly asked him how to do things and worked harder than anyone else, and so willingly. When she had decided to go for a swim in the river, he did not want her to leave, but to stay near him. He had not been able to relax after she left, and had called Shakhlo and falteringly asked her to go after Munira. Askar had not let that pass either, and laughed when he noticed the girls returning from the river.

"Who can solve a riddle?" he said, turning to the others.

"I can," Ozoda said.

"I doubt it," Askar said, shaking his head. "Well, all right, tell me why Ravshan's face is so lit up."

Everyone tried to guess, but no one hit upon the answer.

"I'll tell you," Askar said. "His face is lit up by the rays of the sun, which is rising from the river."

The others laughed. And Ravshan had not gotten angry at the joke, but in fact, had liked it. True, he had intended to frown, but couldn't and smiled openly because he had felt so good. Would that really never happen again? But what had he done wrong? Why was it his fault? No, it was just a misunderstanding. Ravshan would tell Munira that. He just had to catch her alone.

"Hello, my young shock workers!" Ravshan heard Ashur's voice. "Hard at work, I see. That's something I can understand."

The bricklayer approached the foundation of the future gym and looked at the neat piles of bricks. They had separated the newly delivered bricks from those which had been removed from the foundation.

"Good for you!" Ashur said very satisfied. "And you, Ravshan, are like your father. You like order."

"The only thing is we..." Ravshan began.

"You what?"

"There ... the cement," Ravshan faltered. "We didn't have time to put it in the sacks."

"Is that all?" the bricklayer laughed. "Actually, it is better in the hole. You'll be carrying it in barrows, why make extra work for yourselves. Who needs it?"

The foreman's answer cheered Askar more than anyone, and he whispered in Munira's ear:

"Ravshan and his uncle need it."

Munira snickered, and covered her mouth with her hand. She looked at Ravshan. No, he hadn't heard anything. If he

had, he would have been hurt. But maybe he was already upset with her. Ah, what did she care what Ravshan was thinking! Let him think what he wanted, there was no reason for him to be so obstinate.

"We'll start laying the bricks in an hour," Ashur said. "In the meantime, we'll get everything ready before the other bricklayers arrive."

"All right," they answered.

Someone said with surprise, "Look, Anzor has decided to pay us a visit."

No one had noticed Anzor approaching on his donkey. He turned away immediately when his eyes met Shakhlo's. He hurriedly took two large pails of grapes from the side-baskets and put them on the ground. Then he scrambled up on his donkey and struck him with a switch. But the young people surrounded him and would not let him leave.

"Where are you going? Why don't you join us?"

Anzor had to climb off his donkey.

"Wait a minute, let us get a good look at you," Askar shouted, as he hovered over the samovar. "Why are you in such a hurry?"

"I have a lot to do."

"Take it easy, you'll get it all done," Askar stood up and limped over. "I won't let you leave until you've had a cup of my delicious tea."

Anzor paled when he saw Askar limping. He waited until he was close, and then grabbed his shirt front.

Askar did not understand why Anzor was so angry. He tried to pull free, but Anzor held him tightly and would not let go.

"Let me go, you fool!" he gasped. "You're choking me!"

Anzor grew even more furious:

"You even act as if you don't understand."

Askar did not know what to do. He could not hit him—they would say he struck a poor cripple. But was he really, if he was ready to choke him with such strong hands.

Shakhlo came to Askar's rescue. She picked up a ladle of water from near the fire and moved toward Anzor. He had already had dealings with that crazy girl, so he let go of Askar, got on his donkey, and rode away, mercilessly digging his bare heels into the animal's sides.

"Hey, wait!" Askar shouted after him. "I'm not making fun of you! Ravshan hit me with a brick."

Late that afternoon Ravshan went to the office. When he returned he told Askar he had been assigned a truck for the sand.

"Did you hear that, guest?" he said to Shakhlo, very pleased. "Get ready for a trip. Tomorrow morning we're leaving for the pasture."

Ravshan stopped as he passed Munira, and bent over as if to tie his shoelace.

"Munira," he whispered. "Are you going to wait for your mother tonight?"

Munira's heart beat wildly. Not knowing what to say, she turned to Ozoda who was struggling with a heavy pail of cement.

"Let me help you, Ozoda," she said.

Ravshan felt deflated. He raised his head and saw Askar talking to Shakhlo about something. "It's all his fault," he growled to himself.

CHAPTER XI
THE PASTURE

The large moon lit up the yurta, making it look white-washed.

Perhaps it was because she heard voices outside or because the river in the lowlands was noisier than usual that night after a brief rain in the mountains, but Shakhlo woke up and opened her eyes in fright. She lay there listening to the endless barking of dogs in the distance, and then sat on the sheepskin and wrapped her arms around her legs.

She had been at the pasture for two days now, staying with Askar's father. Askar had told her a great deal about the place, and she had tried to imagine what it must look like in the spring. Askar was probably telling the truth: the spacious fields became scarlet from tulips and other flowers. He said it was as if they were covered with a scarlet carpet. Maybe he exaggerated a little, but not more than people usually do.

Apparently, the fields were full of quail in the spring. They weren't even afraid of people, and darted out from under your feet. Askar bragged that once he snuck up and captured an inattentive singer with his skull-cap. While he was telling the story his father, who preferred to listen than to talk, shook his head in disbelief:

"Don't you think you have stretched the truth a bit?"

Askar tried to make his stories interesting and for that reason made things up. He was uncomfortable that his father had noticed that.

"Why do you say that, Dad?" he said. "Last year I took the tea-room keeper a whole sack of quail when his aunt was ill."

"Really? Did she recover?"

"Yes," Askar replied. "Mulladost told me that after drinking quail bouillon she felt better immediately."

"That was nice of you, son," his father noted. "It is good to receive an old woman's blessing."

"But it wasn't," Askar said, upset. "You think she is appreciative! She can't even speak. And no one knows if she can hear. Don't be angry, Dad, but she is an ungrateful person."

Askar's father was intrigued by his son's statement. He took the teapot from the hearth and sprinkled some tea in it. After letting it steep well, he poured it into a cup and then back into the pot, according to the Uzbek custom for making tea.

"Why do you say that?" he finally asked.

"I just do," Askar said unwillingly.

"Why, Askar?" Shakhlo, asked.

Askar waved his hand as if to say it was not worth talking about. Then he remembered something and laughed hollowly.

"Should I tell you?"

"Yes, please do."

"Actually it isn't very interesting," Askar began with the casualness of an experienced storyteller. "True, it was pretty exciting when I was assigned group leader. And not of older kids, but of twenty little ones, twenty. Naturally, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to handle them. So I asked the kids what they wanted me to do with them. It turned out to be a snap: read books to them and tell them stories. In other words, try to entertain them. I swore to myself that they would never be bored with me and got busy. During the long recesses I read them stories of some king, and the children sat there listening though they

should have been playing outside in the school playground. During short recesses I also read or sang songs. I always sang the same song. It's called "Books Are My Friends". I'm afraid that after that song, they hate books. One day, as a joke, I read five theories and eight axioms from a geometry textbook. They didn't understand a thing but they laughed. I realized right away what they liked. One day their teacher caught me as I was walking by, took me to the library, and got a book. He told me to read it to them because the children should know their people's past in order to understand the future. So I read that thick book to my charges. And even I got depressed as I read. I felt sorry for the poor and became angry when I saw how those rich landowners and the *ishans* stole from them in broad daylight. I decided to show the kids how our grandfathers lived, and told them about the museum in the city. The next day I brought a German textbook so they could hear how other people talk, but they did not want to listen. All they wanted was to go to the museum. They didn't care that it was a hundred kilometers away — they wanted to go and that was it. I thought hard, I would have been happy to take them, but who would have given me permission? Finally I had a brainstorm. Why don't I take them to Mulladost's shack. It is like a museum. I was pleased with my idea. The kids would go crazy over such an adventure. After school we headed for our 'museum'. And his aunt met us with her cane. She hit me before I had a chance to tell her why we had come."

"What happened then?" Shakhlo was curious.

"You shouldn't ask," Askar laughed. "The kids were so scared they ran off in all directions. It wasn't easy to drag them out from their hiding places and gather them together. See how they struck poor and righteous people in the old

days,' I said. When I asked a little girl with a red bow in her hair how she liked it, she started to cry. 'We won't come here again, will we?' she asked. 'Sure we will,' I said gaily. 'You need to see everything for yourselves.' When I turned around all the kids were gone."

Shakhlo laughed. Then she remembered something and grew thoughtful.

According to what Askar and the others had said, the aunt was a deafmute. And it seemed Salijan had told her that a mute, crazy woman lived in the village when he was a child. Yes, he had said that once the woman had uttered a terrible cry and had run away as if chased by devils. Shakhlo remembered that part well: she had screamed when Gyulnara's father fell to the ground and began to writhe. Maybe the tea-room keeper's aunt was the same crazy sister-in-law of the *ishan*. If that was true, then how did Shakhlo hear her talking? She had distinctly heard Mulladost talking to someone in the inner courtyard when she had gone to get him for the truck driver. Who could he have been speaking with? True, it did not sound like a woman, but maybe that crazy old woman had a deep voice. Or was there someone else with them? If the crazy woman Salijan had talked about was still alive, then she was no longer mute — she could talk. And Salijan knew nothing about it. She would have to ask Mulladost about those Salijan had spoken of. She had asked Muminjan as soon as she arrived, but he hadn't known. And he had never heard of Salijan's letter.

"Mulladost handles the correspondence," he had said. "You'll have to ask him."

When she mentioned the letter to Mulladost, his eyes opened wide as if a bottomless pit yawned in front of him. Then he shrugged his shoulders: who remembers every letter? He was

about to tell her she should not bother adults with foolish questions, but changed his mind and remained silent: after all, she was the chairman's guest.

"My dear girl," he said in a silky voice. "The summer is very short and you won't even notice how it flies by. You should spend more time playing and laughing. Enjoy your vacation. If you like, I'll ask that you be given a car, and you and Ravshan can ride up in the mountains. The air there is life-giving! If I had wings do you think I would sit here in the village? I would fly to the mountains! Have you seen how beautiful it is there? If you know nothing about the mountains, then you haven't seen anything on earth."

"What about the letter?" Shakhlo interrupted, not waiting for him to finish. "Did you receive a letter like that?"

"A letter, you say?" Mulladost closed his eyes, pretending to think hard. "No, my dear girl, I don't remember a letter like that. Do you think I would have kept such an important letter? If it had come then I would have passed it directly on to Muminjan. Since he did not recieve it, then obviously it never arrived. We'd never remain silent about an important letter! A letter ... a letter is sacred. It is doubly sacred for me! It is even sacred for Muminjan. It is sacred for all of us..."

And he continued to talk such nonsense that Shakhlo began to think perhaps craziness ran in his family.

She lost hope of finding out something definite: Mulladost avoided her and did not even return her greetings.

One day Muminjan brought up the subject at dinner.

"It seems that none of those your neighbor is seeking is left. You see, the village isn't the same as it used to be. Many moved away, and quite a few new faces have appeared. None of the old-timers remembers that teacher. After she disappeared

without a trace, the school was not reopened for some time. That is all Mulladost could find out."

A few days later, Muminjan recalled something else.

"You know, there is a spring in the pasture with the strange name of Kisbulak, or Virgin Spring. There are a lot of other springs nearby, but none of them has a name. I remember someone told me the legend of the Virgin Spring A blue-eyed fairy with golden hair came out of the spring. The shepherd who was drawing water became frightened, threw his ladle into the water, and wanted to run, but he couldn't, his legs were like stone. The fairy spoke to him in a human voice: 'Drink water from this spring and you'll be cured! Encourage everyone to drink from this spring since it is holy and medicinal.' She spoke those words and then vanished into thin air. And it is true that the water in that spring is very delicious, though I don't know how medicinal it is. Of course, that is all a legend. In other words, Shakhlo, when you go to the pasture, try to find something out about the golden-haired fairy from the shepherds. They will most certainly tell you the legend themselves."

Something snapped loudly behind the yurta. Shakhlo went outside and saw Askar squatting near the fire. After blowing on the flames, he turned to Shakhlo.

"Well, are you rested?"

"Is it morning already?"

"No," Askar said, rubbing his eyes which were tearing from the sharp smoke of manure bricks. "It is still evening. You fell asleep right after the shish kebab and fermented goat's milk. Apparently you like to sleep. We could have shot a cannon off and you wouldn't have stirred."

"That's not true."

"Why should I lie? I ruined my voice trying to wake you up. I shouted and called, but you did not move."

"Why did you want to wake me?"

"My father wanted you to have a cup of tea," Askar explained. "If you go to bed early in the evening, you'll wake up in the morning with a headache."

"So you are making tea for me?"

"Who else? I'd rather drink spring water and nothing else. Wait just a few more minutes and it will be ready."

"No, thanks, Askar, I don't want any. Where is Jumankul?"

"He went to look for a lost kid. He noticed one was missing when he drove the sheep home."

"Why didn't you go with him?"

Askar looked at her in surprise: how could he leave her by herself?

"I thought you would cry if you found yourself alone in the yurta."

"Humph!" Shakhlo replied, insulted. "I'm no coward."

"Why don't the two of us go?"

"I'm ready."

Askar cheered and leaped to his feet. He went behind the yurta and led out a saddled horse. Apparently he had gotten that grey horse ready much earlier. Before Shakhlo had a chance to say anything, he was in the saddle.

"Climb up and let's go."

She grew timid. She had never even ridden a donkey, much less a horse. But she made up her mind and began to roll up her pantlegs. Askar couldn't hold back a smile. Why do that? It was a horse, not a bicycle. Apparently she wanted to gain time and hide her fear. It would be best if his father appeared with

the kid so they wouldn't have to go. "Aren't you sly," he thought, but did not show it.

"Can I help you?"

"No, what for? I can do it myself."

"Then hurry!"

Shakhlo realized she could not put off the ride any longer. She placed one foot in the stirrup and clambered up behind Askar.

The grey, seeming to sense Shakhlo's anxiety, moved at a smooth pace and Shakhlo's fear gradually subsided. She began to look around with interest. Everything seemed different from high up on the horse's back. The river, running through the lowlands, wound around like a snake. In places it was dark, while in others it shone in the moonlight. And the pasture, lying between two mountain ranges, resembled a huge cup.

It was light. The cicadas sang tirelessly under the sun-dried grass and dark bushes. Somewhere in the distance a truck rumbled and dogs barked. But once they rode behind the hill the noise of the river disappeared and it grew quiet.

The horse walked evenly. The grass softly rustled under her hooves. If Shakhlo had known the grey was so calm, she wouldn't have been afraid. And she was sorry she had not agreed when Jumankul suggested they ride into the mountains on horseback. Now there she was, sitting calmly behind Askar and not even hanging on to his shoulders. She felt relaxed. The wind blew in her face and she closed her eyes tightly and rode.

"Well, how do you like it?" Askar asked.

"You are lucky."

"Why?"

"Because you spend every summer here."

Askar either did not hear her or did not want to answer.

He sniffed a couple of times, and only then, after a long pause, said sadly:

"I used to come here often. I couldn't wait to get here."

"And now?"

"Now I don't," he said. "While Mama was alive I couldn't stay in the village. As soon as I knew a truck was coming this way, I'd crawl into the back and lie still so the driver wouldn't see me. Once I even hid in an empty barrel. Mama would beg me not to skip school and would take me back to my aunt's house in the village herself. She's been gone two years. Of course, my father's wife is all right. I can't complain ... she's nice."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know," Shakhlo said in a whisper.

They rode for a long time in silence. Shakhlo realized that it was impossible to comfort Askar with words. She was sorry she had asked such a question. She should have guessed right away. As soon as they left the village Askar had stopped joking and become a different person — sad and thoughtful. Maybe his mother had once walked over the ground they were now traveling. Maybe her son was searching for her footprints.

Tears came to Shakhlo's eyes, and she bit her lip. She thought of her own mother. Maybe she was thinking of Shakhlo there on the shore of Issyk-Kul and was telling her father that she missed her daughter. Shakhlo knew her father well. He would not show he missed her. Strange, why did all fathers try not to show their feelings? Were they ashamed? And boys were almost the same. You had to dig deeper to understand them. Who would have thought that Askar could get depressed when he was always so gay and laughing?

Shakhlo remembered her first day at the pasture. The driver let them off at the Virgin Spring and promised to pick them

up on the way back if they wanted. Askar ran to the spring surrounded by large cobblestones, and began to scoop up water in his hands. He washed and quenched his thirst. Shakhlo had watched him with a smile, and then she too approached the spring and kneeled over the stones from which the water bubbled.

"It's ice cold," Askar said. "Takes your breath away. But don't be afraid, Shakhlo."

"What's there to be afraid of?" she answered, and scooped up some water in her hands.

For some reason she felt like laughing, and the water dribbled down her chin onto her dress. She had taken only one sip, yet a chilly sweetness ran through her entire body.

"I see why the fairy chose this spring," she said. "I never thought spring water could be so delicious."

"See, I told you," Askar said, shaking his head. "It's not water but more like milk. Only it's a little too cold."

They heard the sound of horse's hooves in the distance. Askar stood up and raced toward the rider. Shakhlo ran after him. When the distance between father and son was about ten meters, Jumankul gracefully leaped down from the saddle and embraced his son. He did not let go of him until Shakhlo approached. The shepherd wiped a tear away with his rough hand.

"I've missed you, Askar," he said hollowly. "And Mother waited for you for a long time. She left only today. Her father is ill."

Shakhlo had thought it strange that Askar had not said his grandfather was ill.

If Shakhlo had known Jumankul's wife was not Askar's real mother, she never would have asked such a question.

"Are you tired?" Askar asked. The long silence made him uncomfortable.

"Not in the least."

"When I come to the pasture, my father always gives me this horse. She is very gentle, and is easy to ride."

"Yes, she really is gentle. And to think I was afraid."

"That's ridiculous. You could ride her standing up and she wouldn't throw you. She's very clever."

Suddenly something gleamed coldly in the dark grass and scurried to one side with a hiss.

"What is that?" Shakhlo asked.

"A snake. Didn't you see?"

Shakhlo shivered with fright. It suddenly seemed to her that the snake was about to strike and wrap around her leg. She raised her feet to the horse's croup, but lost her balance and fell.

She screamed piercingly when she hit the ground. Askar jumped down and helped her to her feet. She was shaking all over and felt faint with fear.

"What's the matter with you, Shakhlo? Afraid of a snake? But it's not poisonous. It's a grass snake, a harmless grass snake."

Shakhlo could not think or speak, but just stared at the ground. Askar carefully sat her on the horse. Only then did she come to senses and mutter some excuse.

"Don't worry, it's the first time you've seen one," Askar said.

Shakhlo thought he would laugh at her, but she was wrong.

"Did you hurt yourself when you fell?" he asked with concern.

"No, I was just very frightened."

Askar did not mount the horse but led her by the reins. Shakhlo had recovered from her recent scare and watched Askar

out of the corner of her eye. He walked gaily, like the brave shepherd in the fairy tale who saved the princess's life and who feared neither dragons nor other insidious monsters. Shakhlo envied him. He wasn't even afraid of snakes.

She did not know that at that very minute Askar was cursing himself for his stupidity. "What a dunce," he told himself. "I should have let her sit in the saddle from the first and walked alongside. And why did I have to say it was a snake? I should have told her it was a lizard or something. Maybe she is upset. Thinks I don't know how to behave. But that doesn't have anything to do with snakes. Too bad there aren't miracles anymore. But what if there were? What if the wall of a dragon's castle rose in front of us? Then I'd rescue Shakhlo. No, not Shakhlo, but a princess, faint with fear. Rescue her right from the jaws of the evil dragon and carry her in my arms far, far away, overcoming all obstacles. Then Shakhlo would know what kind of person I am."

Askar sneaked a glance at her. Actually, if it weren't for her pants and short hair, she looked like the little princess from the fairy tale. Askar wished he could walk under the moonlight with the princess to the distant mountains and get lost there. The dragon, who was now in death throes at his castle gate, would do his last magic and make the mountains grow up around them. If their path was blocked, and the princess shed tears like diamonds, like in fairy tales, and asked Askar how they would get out, he would tell her not to fear. "Dry your tears, Princess. What are lifeless mountains to a warrior if he has slayed the fierce dragon himself!" He would take the princess and her horse on his shoulders and to the world's astonishment, would step over the tallest mountain with one giant stride... No, no, the mountains didn't need to grow

since Askar would step over them anyway. Let's try another variation: say the mountains were covered with razor-sharp stones and his mother was on the peak. She wanted to see her son, but he was standing at the foot of the mountain, barefoot. She would shout to him: "Don't come, son. You'll cut your feet!" She desperately wanted to see her son up close, but did not want him to suffer because of her. And the princess begged him not to go. (Evil and deceitful princesses lived long ago — this one was very kind.) But Askar ignored them. He was prepared to walk barefoot over thorns the rest of his life if he could see his mother's smile and hear her voice just once. How sad miracles only happen in fairy tales.

"Askar," Shakhlo interrupted his thoughts. "Do you hear that?"

A light wind brought the sound of a gentle melody and then carried it away again. Askar knew his father always carried a small transistor radio, but he could not figure out where the sound of the *nai*, a musical instrument resembling a reed pipe, was coming from. He looked around and noticed the dark shadow of a rider near the foothills.

"It's my father," he said.

When they descended toward the ravine and rode out on the other side, the music grew louder.

"Do you have the kid?" Askar shouted.

"Yes, the little devil. I had a terrible time finding him."

"Then you must be in a great mood," Askar smiled.

Jumankul laughed.

"Don't beat around the bush. Tell me what you want right away."

"Please tell our guest the legend of the Virgin Spring. She would like to hear it."

"I'll be glad to," Jumankul agreed.

They turned their horses to the yurta. On the way back, Shakhlo rode alone and handled the reins herself. There was no trace of her previous fear. Askar sat behind his father.

When they reached the yurta, the fire had already gone out. While Askar's father took the kid to the flock, Shakhlo and Askar fanned the flames. Jumankul returned, got a small rug from yurta, and spread it near the fire.

Chapter XII
LEGEND BECAME FACT

"No, my girl, what I'm going to tell you is not a legend," Jumankul began his tale. "There is a big difference between the legend you heard from Muminjan and the details I know. I was convinced of that when I heard the story from an old mountaineer."

"And you didn't even tell me," Askar said, a little put out.

"You did not ask me," Jumankul smiled. "Shakhlo has expressed an interest, but you... It's been a long time since I last saw you, son."

Askar grew embarrassed and fell silent. Jumankul took a sip of his already cold tea, and then stroking the ends of his moustache, fell into deep thought.

"Kabul told me the story not long before his death," he finally said. "He worked as a shepherd with my father on both sides of the mountain. They were never apart while my father was alive. My father died a long time ago. Then Kabul aged, his sight grew bad, and he was forced to return to his village.

He did not have a wife or children, but the villagers loved and respected him, and made sure the old man was cared for. Not long before his death, he sent someone for me. I did not put off the trip and started out after leaving the flock with my assistant. You can't get there by car since there is an impassable, snow-covered gorge, so I rode on horseback. It took me two days to travel through the mountains to that village. I found Kabul's house with no trouble. He lived at the foot of a small mountain where two streams joined to form a river. I tied the horse to an old hazel tree, entered the courtyard through the low gate, and stopped in my tracks. A huge wolfhound with clipped ears was standing in the middle of the yard.

"The man lying on a bench under the apricot tree told me to come in and not to be afraid of the dog. He wasn't fierce.

"I looked at the old man carefully. He was short, with a long beard reaching almost to his chest. I walked over and greeted him.

" 'You must be Kimaanbai's son,' he muttered.

"I told him I was. We embraced and then the old man sat me down next to him.

" 'I recognized you,' he said. 'Your voice reminds me of Kimaanbai. God grant that your life be longer than his was. And Kimaanbai had broad shoulders like yours. But I can't see your face well. My sight is poor, my son. I remember Kimaanbai had a sharp nose and thick eyebrows.'

"I stayed for three days. He told me a lot about my father and about the years they spent together in the mountain pastures. The old man slept little, and I forgot my tiredness listening to his stories. We stayed up almost until dawn talking. I already told you that he had a huge, old dog. Well, he sat there next

to the bench the whole time, as if he understood human speech. Out of curiosity I asked about the old wolfhound.

" 'They're a smart breed,' Kabul told me. 'I always had wolfhounds. But the smartest and strongest of them all was with me a long time ago.'

"That's when I learned the real story of the blue-eyed woman."

"Do you mean the dog had something to do with the legend?" Askar asked.

"You are getting ahead of the story," Jumankul smiled. "It was then I learned the legend was not a legend, but had really happened."

"So the woman wasn't a fairy," Shakhlo said.

"Yes, Shakhlo, that's right," Jumankul said. "There was no fairy involved at all. I'll tell you everything as it happened. Kabul was a little over thirty when he began to lose his sight. He was a strong, hardy man and the shepherds were sorry to lose such a good worker. One of the old men advised him to drink only spring water, saying it would help. So Kabul began to travel several miles each night to the spring after the flock had settled down. He would fill an entire wineskin with water. And apparently the water really helped because his condition improved.

"One night he headed for the spring as usual. It was still early and the flock was sleeping in the fold. An enormous wolfhound trained to answer only his call, ran along beside. That summer had been particularly rainy. When he was halfway there, he noticed lightning in the distant night sky. He thought about turning back, but suddenly the wolfhound tore ahead, and after going about a hundred meters, howled anxiously. Kabul's heart began to pound and he urged his horse on with

an uneasy feeling. The dog ran on. Then he stared at the opposite bank, barked, ran to the spring, and hid behind a large boulder. Kabul dismounted and looked across the river, but he saw nothing suspicious. He led the horse to the spring and bent down to fill his wineskin. At that moment he heard the sound of horses' hooves in the distance.

"There was a rocky plateau on the opposite bank where nothing grew. For that reason no one drove their animals there. So why would horsemen be riding there? And at night? More than anything, he was on edge because of the dog's behavior. The animal lay in wait, poised to attack. The shepherd led his horse further from the spring just in case, and sat down behind the boulders. He recalled how two years before, bandits had attacked their village, plundering and burning houses. They had driven off almost all the livestock. There was nothing anyone could do. Those who resisted were shot. And it still was not calm in the mountains: hidden bands still tried to do harm. They could not accept the fact that former farm laborers were organizing collective farms. Not long before, he had heard that they burned the storeroom in one of the new collective farms, and tried to kill the chairman of another. Remembering that, Kabul was on guard.

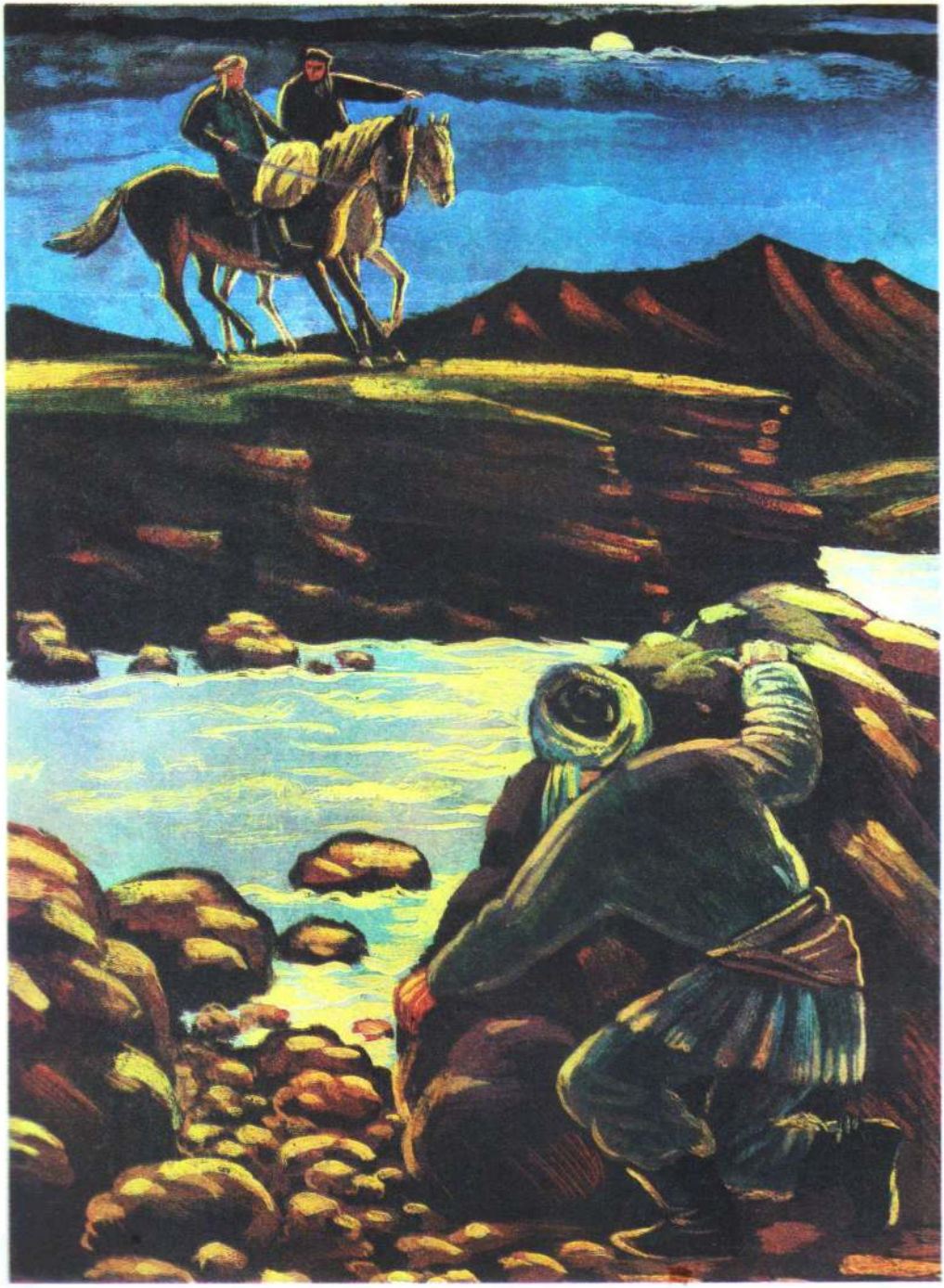
"Meanwhile, the sound of horses' hooves grew closer. Respectable people didn't prowl the plateau like hungry wolves. What were they doing? If they kept galloping like that, they would plunge into the river. It is difficult to stop a horse at a precipice. He listened carefully and realized the riders were slowing their horses. That meant they knew about the sharp drop ahead of them. Then the barely distinguishable silhouettes of two riders, one tall and the other short, appeared. Kabul was frightened: what if they noticed his horse? But they were

too busy with their own affairs. They hurriedly unloaded something and threw it off the steep cliff into the river. Then they leaped on their horses and galloped away. The dog tore off toward the river. Kabul stood up, and hurried to the bank, but no matter how he strained his eyes, he could not see anything in the river. He ran along the bank, calling the dog but he couldn't even hear him barking. Finally he made out something dark on the crest of a large wave. The wolfhound. The current was carrying him to the bend where the river ran into a stone wall and turned sharply to the left. Kabul dove into the water and swam to the dog who was moving slowly. He caught up with the animal and saw he was holding a sack in his teeth. Kabul dove under the water to grab the sack from underneath, but became frightened when his hand touched something soft through the cloth. He overcame his fear, grabbed the end of the sack and felt something round, like a human head. The shepherd swam to the surface and cried out in fear.

" 'Heip! Help! Please, someone help!'

"His voice was lost in the noise of the river. After shouting at the top of the lungs, he realized it wouldn't help if he did not get the sack out in time. He and the dog neared the bank and he lowered his feet to the bottom — it was shallow. He could not lift the sack — he was too weak — so he held up the end where the head was. The dog pulled on the other end.

"They finally reached the bank. Kabul's teeth chattered from the cold. He was overcome with dread. Taking out his sharp knife, he carefully cut the edge of the sack. He had not been mistaken: a beautiful, young woman lay in the sack! Her arms and legs were tied. Kabul was astonished. He pulled the gag out of her mouth and cut the ropes binding her. It was dangerous to remain there. He called to his horse, picked up the woman,



and somehow managed to climb up into the saddle. Then he carefully laid the lifeless body in front of him.

" 'Hiah!' he urged the horse. 'It's fate. One can't escape it.'

"He headed back to his yurta. The wolfhound ran ahead spritely, as if he understood he and his owner had done a good deed. Kabul held the woman's head down, and water dribbled from her mouth.

"Once inside the yurta, he lay the woman on a sheepskin so that her head was lower than her body. Then he lit a candle and was even more astonished than before: the woman looked nothing like local women. Her hair was golden and her face was very pale. He began to rub her arms and legs to get the circulation moving. Who was she? Where had she come from? Why had they tried to drown her?

"He did not close his eyes all night. Only early the next morning, when it began to get light, did the woman move slightly. The pale mask of death left her face. The shepherd's happiness knew no bounds. He had given up hope that the woman was alive, and could not hold back his sobs: 'Oh Allah, let misfortune come down on me. Take half my life and give it to her, so that she can again see the light of the sun!'

"The shepherd did not notice that his tears were falling on the woman's face. Her blue lips quivered, and she moaned weakly, shivering. Kabul leaped up and then sat back down at her head. The woman was breathing more deeply. Perhaps she would like something to drink. He went outside and called the saddled horse, but as he took the reins he suddenly remembered the flock was still shut in the fold. When he opened the door the hungry sheep poured out. Kabul mounted the horse and galloped to the spring.

"When he returned after having filled the wineskin he had left that night, the woman was breathing evenly, but her eyes were still closed. Kabul poured several drops of cold water on her lips. The woman tried to open her eyes, and it seemed as if it caused her great pain. She was too weak. (At this point in the story Shakhlo remembered that the fairy in the legend had opened her eyes after a sip of spring water and then her lips had moved and she was able to speak.)

"The woman opened her eyes. They were clear blue and her hair, as I already mentioned, was the color of gold. Kabul was amazed at her eyes: he had never seen eyes like that before. They were as blue as the sky after a spring rain."

Jumankul fell silent. After a pause he spoke.

"There is your legend. Does it sound like one to you?"

Shakhlo sat motionless, staring at the storyteller.

"Is that all?" Askar asked anxiously.

"No, that's not all," Jumankul said. "Later the woman regained consciousness. Kabul did not leave her until she recovered fully. The woman thanked him and said: 'If it weren't for you, I would not be among the living. It is a good thing the spring exists.' She did not tell Kabul her name, or say where she was from, though he asked. She was afraid of something, though she realized the shepherd was an honest man. She did not even mention her enemies—those who had thrown her in the river. On the third day she took leave of the shepherd. She said she had to save a little girl. Kabul waited for her for a long time, thinking she would return. He asked the other shepherds but they simply shrugged their shoulders. None of them had seen a blond woman. Many did not believe him. The poor man could do nothing but wait and hope to hear something about her. But he never did. Kabul remembered and talked

about that golden-haired woman to the end of his days. Perhaps that is how the legend got started. You know, if you tell any story over and over, it will become a legend in time."

"It was she!" Shakhlo suddenly cried. "Yes, it was the same woman!"

"Who? What are you talking about?" Jumankul asked in surprise, looking at the girl's excited face.

Then Shakhlo related Salijan's story. She told them how he had, by some miracle, remained alive and was interested in knowing what happened to others from his village. She explained that he had asked her to find something out in the village. Jumankul's astonishment grew.

"If the golden-haired woman was that teacher, then all that happened after Salijan left the village," he said.

"Why?" Shakhlo asked.

"Think a moment. If the teacher returned to the village a few days later, then Salijan should have known about that, isn't that right?"

"But what if the teacher was unable to return?" Askar interjected.

"What do you mean, she couldn't return?"

"Well, let's say she fell into the hands of the bandits on the way."

Jumankul thought for a while.

"Yes, that certainly could have happened," he said. "But if we..." he began to think.

"What do you mean?" Shakhlo asked excitedly. "What did you want to say?"

"If we do a little investigating," Jumankul said. "Find out what happened to Gyulnara. If Gyulnara is still alive, maybe she knows something about the teacher. What do you think?"

"You are right," Shakhlo said. She had already decided to send for Salijan.

"Great!" Askar said, enthused. "Tomorrow I'll begin to go around the village and talk to every Gyulnara I can find, no matter how many there are."

Jumankul couldn't contain a smile.

"First you should remember that our Gyulnara, if she is alive, is over fifty. And she probably has a lot of children. So you should look for her among middle-aged women."

Jumankul again fell silent, thinking about something. Then he turned to Shakhlo:

"Did your neighbor have any troubles before he wrote that letter?"

"No, I don't think he did."

"Are you sure?"

"He wouldn't have kept it from me. He told me so much."

"You're right. Do you know what he wrote about?"

"He said he mentioned the names of several children who were his classmates, and also the name of the teacher. He was particularly interested in knowing what happened to Raissa Maximovna."

"Strange," Jumankul said.

"What do you mean?" Askar asked.

"Think about it," his father said. "It's all very odd. The answer to his letter was put in the mailbox. That means someone made a special trip to Salijan's. They could have simply mailed a letter if they did not know what happened to those people. It seems to me the person who answered did not want to use the mail, for some reason. I find that strange."

"So you think..." Shakhlo said, frightened. "Salijan said the same thing."

"No, don't go thinking anything bad," Jumankul hurried to reassure her. "Maybe there is nothing special in that. Who knows? After all, it happened so long ago I can't imagine anyone would want to persecute a person for the distant past. The reason I said that is because Askar wants to look for Gyulnara. I think he should be more cautious. Considering all that happened, the search for her should be discreet and not attract a lot of attention. I didn't mean someone would try to stop you, but that you shouldn't upset people for nothing."

When they went to bed, Shakhlo couldn't sleep. She lay there listening to Askar and his father discuss the sand for the construction of the school gym. His father assured him there was enough sand to build a whole town.

Shakhlo had a strange dream. It was a bright day, but without the sun. A large moon floated overhead like a brass tray. "Why does the moon shine so brightly?" Shakhlo shouted to the sky. From far away came the answer. "Because I desire it," said a clear, ringing voice which sounded like the song of the *nai*.

At first, Shakhlo couldn't understand where the voice was coming from. Then she saw that same blue-eyed, golden-haired woman in the distance, the fairy from the legend. "Askar did it!" she thought. "He knew the woman would be here and he even came with a wineskin and managed to sprinkle her face with icy spring water. Otherwise she couldn't have spoken in a human voice."

"Don't be surprised, Shakhlo," the fairy said. "It was not Askar, but Kabul himself who brought me to life with water. Look at that mischief-maker Askar. I have hypnotized him."

And there was Askar, sleeping with the huge wineskin under his head. Shakhlo was frightened: what if he never woke up?

After all, that happened in fairy tales. You fall asleep and never wake up. Shakhlo began to shake him.

"Don't bother. You can't rouse him," the golden-haired fairy said in the same pleasant voice. "I will wake him myself, but first, I want to talk to you. He mustn't know our secret. Let him sleep. Come closer, Shakhlo. Don't be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid. Why should I fear you?" she said, though she was terrified. "See, I'm coming."

Shakhlo took a step, but suddenly her feet left the ground and she was flying as if she had grown wings. In an instant she was beside the blue-eyed fairy. She was very beautiful and smiled tenderly. Her eyes were very kind. Shakhlo tried to memorize every feature of her face in order to tell Salijan about her when she returned to town.

"Were you looking for me?"

"Yes, I was," Shakhlo said, and a lump grew in her throat. "You know, Salijan talks about you so often."

The fairy smiled and her blue eyes shone.

"I remember Salijan," she said. "Is he still such a fine boy?"

Shakhlo did not dare object to say it had been years since Salijan was a boy and that he even had grey hair.

"Tell me where Salijan can find you?" she asked "He's been looking for you for such a long time."

Suddenly there was the sound of horses' hooves.

"They are after me again!" the fairy cried, and dove into the river. She surfaced for an instant. "Tell Salijan that he should look for me here, in these parts."

And she disappeared, forgetting to waken Askar, who was still in a trance by the spring. Shakhlo grabbed the wineskin and poured all the water over his head, but to no avail.

"Get up, Askar! Get up!" she burst out crying.

"Hey, Shakhlo, wake up! What are you sniffling about? Did you have a nightmare?"

She opened her eyes and saw Askar's frightened face above her.

"Are you up already, Askar?" She sighed in relief and wiped her wet eyes.

That day at noon, a truck full of sand took Shakhlo and Askar back to the village. Jumankul stood and watched until the truck disappeared behind the hills.

Chapter XIII
YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE DISCHARGED HIM, SON

Ravshan had not been wrong. There were many young people who wished to work on building the gym. Almost everyone who remained in the village that summer vacation turned out to help. It was interesting at the construction site: you could do some work, and talk, and joke around. In other words, there were your kind of people there.

Convinced that the schoolchildren were serious, and seeing how hard they worked in such terrible heat, the chairman excused Mulladost from his office duties and sent him to the site to fix meals. Fortunately, Mulladost agreed. It seemed he too did not want the construction to drag on until the next year.

"You can trust me," he told the chairman. "I will keep an eye on things. And my aunt's been sick for a week, so

it will be easier for me since I'll be working close to home."

One day the foreman Ashur came to the office. The chairman was overjoyed. The bricklayer had appeared at the perfect time. Muminjan had just been informed that there were a lot of weeds in the cotton fields where the sixth crew worked, and he had thought about riding over to the construction site on the way to see the sixth crew. Now he would not have to go to the gym. The bricklayer shook the chairman's hand and sat down on the edge of the *topchan*. He unwillingly took the cup of tea offered.

"What is the matter with you today, Ashur? Got up on the wrong side of bed?" the chairman asked, surprised at the man's unhappy countenance.

"I came to have a talk with you, Muminjan. You and I grew up in the same neighborhood, and have been together since we were kids..."

"I haven't forgotten that."

"I'm not so sure. But hear me out, first. If you remember, we worked together on a construction project. Isn't that right? Then, when you were put in charge of the farm, you asked me to come. I couldn't refuse. You are my friend and I was afraid you'd be offended if I said no. I moved here with my entire family. Almost half the collective farm houses were built by me. I've never shirked my work. Right? I've never taken home one sliver of wood or one brick. Right? Or have you noticed something I've done wrong?"

"No, I haven't. You work honestly, Ashur," Muminjan answered, still not understanding what the bricklayer was leading up to.

"So that means you still think I work honestly?" the master

asked. "If that's true, then please explain why you sent that overseer to the site?"

"Now Ashur, why are you being like that?" the chairman said, hurt. "Think about what you are saying. After all, Mulladost is an excellent cook. He'll fix the kids meals..."

"That's another matter," the bricklayer interrupted. "You tell him he should stick to the cooking and stay away from the building. Tell him not to butt in where he is not needed. I don't like it, Muminjan. I don't want him interfering with my work."

"Can you explain why you are so upset?"

"I can see by the kids, Muminjan. They are out of sorts. I even asked them at lunch why they were walking around so down in the dumps. They've had a lot building up inside them thanks to you. They don't want to spend all their time lugging bricks and mixing cement, they want to build. They asked me to teach them bricklaying. Muminjan, I was excited to hear that, and wanted to kick myself for not thinking of it earlier. I should have guessed."

"Not bad, not bad at all," the chairman said, pleased the young people were so interested.

"So I began. My pupil laid one brick and I laid the second. The work wasn't badly done. If you had only seen them after work that day. They couldn't tear themselves away from the walls. After all, they had made them with their own hands. But then your damn overseer ruined things. He walked over and began to shout that I wanted to delay the work. Said we'd never finish at that rate. I kept silent, but then when Ravshan was laying bricks, he stuck his nose in again. One brick jutted out a bit, and I commented on it, of course, explaining about taking care with your work. Suddenly that Mulladost called from the kitchen tent that I shouldn't reprimand the chairman's son,

and should be ashamed of myself. What's that all about, Muminjan?"

"He was wrong to say that in front of the others," the chairman said.

"So, he should have said it secretly," the master bricklayer retorted, misunderstanding him.

"No, I didn't mean that," the chairman said in confusion.

He was angry with Mulladost: he had acted tactlessly with the master. But deep down inside, he agreed with the tea-room keeper. Ashur could delay urgent work with his lessons. He'd have to explain that to the bricklayer, but how? The master might get offended.

"I understand why you are upset with Mulladost," he said. "Leave it to me. I'll explain things so he'll dare not interfere again. And as far as Ravshan is concerned, you know I don't make a distinction between you and me. You can criticize him if he deserves it. But, my friend, if you are going to spend time with every pupil, won't the work be delayed?"

"Speak more clearly! What are you trying to say?"

"For now let them learn with their eyes."

"And when can they start using their hands?" the bricklayer asked. "Muminjan, they are like little streams now, and need to be guided in time or they'll churn and boil purposelessly, and trickle off in all directions. If you channel them into one flow, then a deep, wide river will form and the flowers in the steppe will bloom just like in the song."

"I agree with you," Muminjan said after a moment's thought. "But I'm afraid it will take some time for you to channel them."

The foreman jumped down from the *topchan* with a spriteness unusual for a man of his age, and briskly walked away.

He did not even look back. The chairman wanted to stop him and explain, but changed his mind: he knew the master's hot temper. "You have only one concern, Ashur, while I have to think about the entire collective farm."

While the chairman and the master were arguing, another event was unfolding at the construction site.

A truck full of sand drove up, and Shakhlo and Askar leaped out of the cab. On seeing the others, Askar said gaily:

"They've already started to eat lunch. Let's hurry, Malika."*

Shakhlo was embarrassed. Askar realized he had said too much, and blushed.

"Listen, Askar," she said, slowing her step. "What is this habit of calling people by different names? I have a name of my own, you know."

"I won't do it again," he said, raising his hands in a gesture of capitulation. "I was joking."

Shakhlo had already realized it wasn't a joke.

"Hello, construction workers!" Askar shouted.

No one answered, and they all looked at him strangely. Munira embraced Shakhlo and the two of them sat down next to one another. No one asked Askar to join. He remained standing in front of everyone, not knowing what to say.

"Wow! Look at how much you've done already," he exclaimed.

Again everyone was silent. Someone even snickered disdainfully. Only then did Askar notice Anzor puttering near the fire. He poured hot water into four teapots and brought them to his classmates.

"What are you looking at me like that for," he asked Askar. "It isn't the first time you've seen me."

---

* Malika — a woman's name which means princess. — *Ed.*

"No, it seems we met before," Askar laughed. "Yes, I remember. You are the same Anzor who was in my class at school. But, forgive me, it is hard to recognize you without your constant companion. Where is your wise donkey?"

"That's enough of your stupid jokes," Ravshan shouted, leaping to his feet. "You think you are smarter than everyone else and can make fun of anyone you please? Come with me."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

Ravshan walked toward the building under construction.

Askar stood there bewildered, not knowing how to understand Ravshan's words. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Go on, what are you standing there for?" Mirkabul, who was the quietest and strongest boy in the class, called out.

"Anzor, it is too bad you left your donkey home," Ozoda said.

"Why?" Anzor asked in surprise.

"We could have put Askar on him facing backwards and taken him to the collective farm office."

Shakhlo could not understand why the others were being so hostile toward Askar.

"What happened?" she asked Munira.

Her friend only sighed in response.

When Askar moved to follow Ravshan, everyone stood up as if on cue. Askar walked around the piles of bricks and stopped next to Ravshan.

"What is that supposed to be?" Ravshan said, placing his hands on his hips.

Askar did not understand a thing.

"I asked you what that's supposed to be?" Ravshan repeated, indicating the hole with the toe of his shoe.

Askar looked down and saw that the cement was hard in one corner. He walked around the hole.

"You know that better than I do, Ravshan."

Ravshan's head broke out in a cold sweat. His eyes widened in fury and he did not even realize he had grabbed Askar's shirt.

"What did you say?"

"Take your hands off me, you fool!"

"Repeat what you said."

Ravshan tightened his grip, though Askar was not resisting. The latter still could not understand what was happening.

"You've gone crazy, Ravshan!" Shakhlo shouted as loud as she could.

Her shout caused Ravshan to lose control completely. He was about to hit Askar, but Shakhlo hurried over and grabbed his arm with unexpected strength. He pushed her, and the girl would have fallen if Ozoda and Mirkabul had not caught her. Only on seeing Shakhlo's pale face did Ravshan come to his senses.

"You've gone too far, Ravshan," Ozoda said.

"Are you defending him?"

"Why fight when you can talk? Askar is guilty and we should tell him that to his face, not start swinging fists."

Ravshan wanted to object, but remained silent. Then he waved his arm as if to say: do whatever you want.

"What is wrong, Ravshan?" Ozoda asked.

He waved his arm again and turned away.

Meanwhile, Mulladost came out of his gate. He gave Askar a hostile look and then walked over to Ravshan, frowning and shaking his head as if unhappy about something.

"Have you seen the master?"

"He's not here, he left. Told us to have lunch without him."

"Where could he have gone?"

Ravshan shrugged his shoulders.

All the young people crowded around Askar and Mirkabul.

"You were here from the start, Askar," Mirkabul began. "Maybe you remember what used to be here."

"A hole," Askar said, looking down at his feet. "Yes, a hole."

"And do you remember what was in the hole?"

"Cement."

"Cement," Ozoda interrupted. "And on whose advice did we put it in the hole?"

"I suggested it."

"Good!" Melikuzy said. "And he isn't even ashamed to say so."

"Be quiet!" Mirkabul said. "Now tell us why you filled the hole with water. You knew the cement would be ruined."

"I filled the hole with water?"

"Yes, you did!" they all answered.

"When?"

"Don't get smart, Askar. You were seen here the evening before you left for the pastures, between ten and eleven o'clock."

Askar wilted.

"Listen, guys," he said, almost crying. "Believe me, I didn't do it."

"Then tell us where you were that night?" Ravshan said, again coming over to the group.

There was a heavy silence. Askar blushed and hung his head. Then he looked sullenly at the tea-room keeper.

The young people were watching Askar and for that reason no one noticed Shakhlo standing there in tears, pale and upset.

Why was Askar silent? Answer them! Tell them you were home! Where else could you have been?

"I was here," Askar finally said, not lifting his head. "Yes, right here."

Shakhlo could not contain herself any longer.

"That's not true!" she cried. "That's not true, Askar."

"How do you know, visitor?" the tęa-room keeper said maliciously. "He is telling the truth. He was here. I saw him myself, and even ran after him, but I could not catch him. I'm not as young as he is."

"Askar!" Shakhlo still could not believe it. "You couldn't have been here."

"I was," Askar said. "I was here that night. But I didn't go anywhere near the irrigation canal or the hole."

"You say you didn't go near them," Ravshan said. "Then why did you run away from Mulladost if you did nothing wrong?"

"That I won't tell you, Ravshan," Askar said with a strange, forced smile. "You could torture me and I wouldn't tell you."

"O. K. You don't have to admit it," Ravshan snickered. "It's all clear anyway. You and I quarreled that day. I accidentally hurt you, and you did it simply to get even with me. Isn't that so? Don't deny it."

"Oh, Ravshan, what's there to get even with? And why get even with *you*! You have too high an opinion of yourself, great man!"

But Ravshan did not hear him.

"We have decided to kick you off our construction team," he said.

"Do whatever you want," Askar said indifferently. "It will be a pleasure not to have to see you."

Askar headed toward the river. Ozoda suddenly felt sorry

for him — he was so gay and hard-working. And to have disgraced himself so! Who would have thought he was capable of something like that?

"It's too bad I didn't bring the donkey," Anzor said loudly, so Ozoda heard. "We could have made him ride it."

Askar slowed his step and looked back.

"It's you they'll put on the donkey backwards. Don't forget that!"

Anzor laughed loudly in response.

Shakhlo was shaken at what had happened. She grew furious when Anzor began to mock Askar, angrily waved her hand at the others, and ran after Askar.

"Wait! Why are you going after him? Let him go!" Ravshan shouted.

Anzor laughed.

"And we call ourselves friends," Nartaji, the mildest person on earth, said softly. "A strange girl is better than we are. Maybe Askar is not lying..."

"Sure, he's not lying. He's a saint. As pure as the driven snow," Ravshan rudely interrupted him. He was angry that Shakhlo had ignored him and run after Askar. She must have some pride!

Ashur appeared in the distance. He looked depressed after his unpleasant conversation with the chairman.

* * *

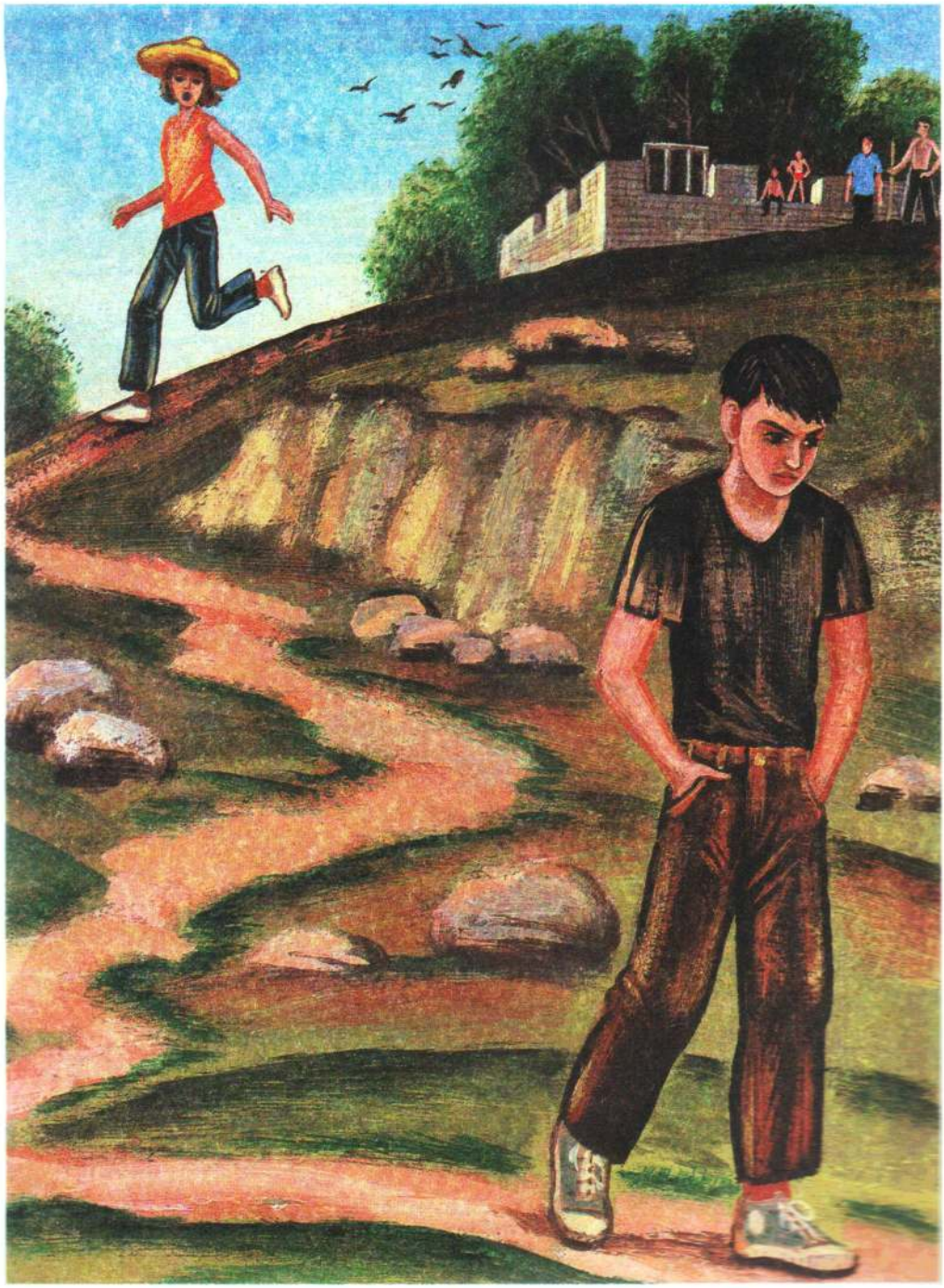
Askar walked toward the river. His thoughts were confused, like after an upsetting dream. There was no trace of his recent affected indifference. What scoundrel wanted to disgrace him? And why? Because of some harmless joke? Maybe it was Anzor

who did it? He was capable of anything. He was like his father in his behavior and even in the way he talked. And no one in the village liked his father, the gardener. Askar had never seen the man smile. And he did not like to talk to people either. If you asked him a question, he only answered "yes" or "no". He was a tall, thin, middle-aged man who walked hunched over, as if he was looking for something he lost. All his habits, even his way of looking back timidly from time to time, had passed on to his son. Askar wondered what Anzor was doing at the construction site. After all, he had sworn in front of everyone that he would not set foot there. Or had Ravshan talked him into coming? No, that one doesn't like to ask, he likes to command. More than likely, the tea-room keeper told him to come so they could be together. Wait a minute, why did he think it was Anzor who poured the water? What if the tea-room keeper himself had done it? No, he couldn't have. He was the one who went to get the cement. Probably someone did it by accident and now the guilt had fallen on Askar. What if the tea-room keeper's crazy aunt went outside and turned on the water? What does she care about cement?

"Askar!"

He turned and could not believe his eyes: Shakhlo was running toward him. No, she was not a princess. She was more like a warrior in a fairy tale who astounded everyone with his bravery and straightforwardness. Who had come to his aid when Ravshan grabbed him? It looked like everyone thought he was guilty. If any one of them had defended him, he would have told them everything, but no one came forward. No, he probably wouldn't have told them. Not even if he were hung up by his heels.

Shakhlo ran up to him and stopped. Her eyes were moist.



"Askar, you didn't..." she couldn't catch her breath. "You didn't do it, did you?"

"No, Shakhlo, I didn't."

It was so plainly said that she immediately calmed down. Until that moment she had had her doubts: she saw that all of the others thought he was guilty.

"I believe you, Askar."

They walked along in silence. When they reached the hill they ran up to the top. The river churned noisily below. The two young people stood for a while, and then walked down to the bank.

Suddenly Askar noticed a red apple being carried along by the waves. It moved toward the bank and got caught in an eddy. Askar broke off a willow branch, rolled up his pant-legs, and waded into the water. He drew the apple to him, and then tossed it to Shakhlo.

"Catch!"

"Thank you, Askar."

"No need to thank me. It came free."

"Can I ask you a question?" Shakhlo said, biting into the apple.

"Sure. But if you want to repeat the one asked a little while ago I won't tell you."

"Please."

Askar sat down next to Shakhlo. They silently watched the muddy water and listened to the muted splash of the waves. Then Askar turned to Shakhlo and shook his head:

"I went for another reason... No, I can't tell you, so don't ask. Later I'll tell you and no one else, but now I can't, Shakhlo."

"All right, if that's what you want," she said. She did not

want to torment him with questions. "Will you be at the construction site tomorrow?"

"No, of course not!" Askar smiled sadly.

"You know, Ravshan said that because he is mad at you."

"Let him be. No, I can't go."

"What will you do?"

"I don't know yet."

"Will you go back to your father's?"

"No, I can't go there," Askar said firmly. "I have to find the liar. I can't leave it like this. And I will find him, you'll see."

"You think you can do it yourself?"

"I won't be by myself. You'll help me."

Askar's straightforwardness cheered Shakhlo. She had begun to think he did not trust her. She was ready to do anything to help if only he would return to the others and be able to look them straight in the eye.

"I only ask you one thing," Askar said. "For now don't tell anyone what my father told us."

"Even Muminjan?"

"He might let the cat out of the bag, and then the tea-room keeper will try to stop is."

"You are right," Shakhlo said, thinking. "It is better that way. I don't like that tea-room keeper either."

* * *

Tutikhan, the chairman's wife, had been waiting for Shakhlo since early morning. Whenever she heard footsteps outside she would stop work and look toward the gate, thinking the girl had returned. She had been at the pasture for several days.

It wasn't like the village there: no one would take care of her. They said it even got cold at night, and she could catch cold.

When Shakhlo finally arrived, Tutikhan hurried over to her, and hugged and kissed her as if she were her own daughter. Shakhlo had not thought the woman would be so happy to see her. Just like her own mother. If her mother hadn't seen her in a while, she would run over just like that, and hug her and look intently in her face, as if seeing her for the first time. Maybe Shakhlo felt so at home at the chairman's because the two women were so much alike.

Tutikhan led her to the veranda, sat her near the low table, put on a tablecloth and set candy, apples and grapes in front of her. Then she brought a whole bowl of cream. Seeing all the good food, Shakhlo suddenly remembered she had not eaten since morning and dug in with a relish.

"Did you like it there, Shakhlo?" Tutikhan asked, looking at her tanned face. "Did you just get back?"

"No, I was at the construction site," Shakhlo answered.

"You should have come here right away. Don't do that again. First you should eat, and then you can go wherever you want," Tutikhan scolded her.

"We brought sand," Shakhlo answered. "Jamankul said there is enough for all kinds of buildings. It is so white and clean, it shines."

"Our guest has finally come to pay us a visit."

Shakhlo turned and saw Muminjan and Ravshan. They hurriedly washed up and sat down at the table.

"Did you learn more about the legend?" Muminjan asked.

Shakhlo was about to tell him what she had heard from the shepherd, but remembered Askar's caution and bit her lip.

"Yes, he told me the same thing," she said tersely.

Ravshan acted as if nothing had happened.

"What happened to you?" his mother asked, on seeing the bruise on his arm.

Ravshan winked at Shakhlo—his mother wouldn't believe it anyway—and announced with feigned anger:

"Shakhlo did that. She really learned to fight up there in the pasture."

"Why are you blaming poor Shakhlo?" his father laughed good-naturedly. "He probably hurt it at the construction site."

"That's not funny, son. Shakhlo would never do something like that," his mother said, annoyed.

Ravshan smiled at Shakhlo: see, they don't believe me. It seemed he was afraid she would tell his father about the clash with Askar. Muminjan did not like fighting. You couldn't even argue in front of him.

They stayed up late, and finally went to bed outside in the yard. Shakhlo made up a bed next to Tutikhan on the big *topchan,* and lay looking at the stars. "They are brighter and bigger at the pasture," she thought. Then she heard snatches of conversation between father and son, who were lying on the *supa*, a large platform made of clay.

"Dad! Hey, Dad!" Ravshan called quietly. "Did you hear?"

"I know all about it."

"Who told you?" Ravshan asked in surprise.

"Mulladost," Muminjan said. "You shouldn't have discharged him, son. That was a mistake."

Ravshan was shocked by his father's words, and remained silent.

Shakhlo lay wide awake and thought about Askar. "Strange, why did he go there that night and won't tell anyone about it? Not even me."

Chapter XIV
MYSTERIOUS AFFAIRS

Askar wandered slowly allong the ravine before going to the empty lot. Then he sat down under a weeping willow and leaned against it. He could see everything from there: the area was unobstructed and lit by the moon. There was not a house or tree in sight. Askar had to go several hundred meters across the lot to reach the tea-room keeper's house and be sure not a living soul saw him. But that was easier said than done. Mulladost had become suspicious, and often went outside at night and stood for a long time, as if he were going to guard the place all night. Sometimes he walked over to the construction site and disappeared. Askar sure wanted to know what he was doing there. Maybe he could not sleep because he was worried about the project, thinking it was taking too long.

The previous night Askar had hoped to creep up to Mulladost's house, but had not plucked up the courage. He had made it as far as the willow, and then returned home. Actually it was a good thing he hadn't ventured further: he definitely would have run into the tea-room keeper. Askar had gone no more than ten steps from the tree when Mulladost had come out of his gate. And he was not alone. His demented aunt was with him. They sat on a log near the gate for quite a long time. Then

the aunt went back inside, but Mulladost remained and wandered around the empty lot for another forty minutes.

But today Askar was determined to do what he had planned, no matter what happened. That was why he was patiently waiting until everything quieted down. He looked at the bridge and then at the tea-room keeper's gate. He began to slink along the lot, but had to turn back. As luck would have it, Munira appeared on the hill near the river. Apparently she had come to wait for her mother. Then he noticed Ravshan at the foot of the hill. He looked at the spot where Munira sat for a few minutes, but did not have the courage to go see her and instead, turned and went home. "If Munira's mother is on duty tomorrow then Shakhlo will spend the night at her place," Askar thought. He hadn't seen Shakhlo since the incident at the construction site. He had wanted to go to the site during the day, but had changed his mind. He imagined how unpleasant that would be for Ravshan. And that fool Anzor would probably be pleased as punch if the others began to reproach him again.

The sound of a motor interrupted his thoughts. He looked towards the opposite bank of the river where a truck was racing along at high speed. It had already reached the bridge. Was it the same truck that had prevented him sneaking up closer to the empty lot yesterday? Did that mean he couldn't go again tonight? It certainly looked like the same one. The truck had crossed the bridge and turned. Yes, it was the same truck, there was no doubt! But wait, why should the truck stop him? In fact, it could help him, and how!

Askar's heart began to beat faster. He took several deep breaths to calm himself, and as soon as the truck turned toward the tea-room keeper's house, he ran from his hiding place. He caught up with the truck since it drove slowly across the

empty lot, and leaped on the back bumper. "Great," he thought. "Now no one will see me." He would get off at Mulladost's yard and run to the wall, where he would be able to hide from the tea-room keeper's sharp eyes.

As soon as the truck slowed down, Askar jumped down and hid in the shadow of the clay wall. He felt around for a thick vine in the dark, and climbed up to the kitchen roof. There, he lay on his stomach holding his breath. His heart beat wildly, as if it wanted to burst from his chest.

He lay motionless for a few minutes, and then lifted his head and saw a pair of green eyes before him. He almost screamed out in fright and crawled backwards on his stomach to get away from those burning eyes. He came to himself just in time. If he had gone a bit further, he would have fallen off the roof. He realized the green eyes belonged to a huge, fluffy cat which lay before him, and relaxed a little. The cat, as if unhappy to be so rudely driven from his favorite spot, slowly crept away.

Askar peeked over the edge of the roof. From there he had a good view of most of the courtyard. It was a pity he could not see what was going on inside the house. He crawled over to the flue. He could hide behind it. Seeing a bunch of grapes hanging over him, Askar smiled (a snack would be just the thing), and then looked toward the gate. For some reason, the tea-room keeper and the truck driver were outside for a long time. Askar was afraid the driver would leave.

But he had worried needlessly: two shadows appeared on the ground near the gate and the host and his visitor entered the courtyard. The truck driver sat down on the edge of the *supa*, which was easy to see from the roof. The tea-room keeper stood in front of his visitor talking for a few minutes, and then sat down next to him.

Mulladost was upset and spoke sporadically. It was impossible to make any sense out of what they were talking about. Soon the truck driver stood up and left.

The motor started up and the truck drove off. Ten minutes passed. The sound of the motor blended with the noise from the river. Suddenly, Askar thought he heard the tea-room keeper's voice coming from the inner courtyard. Who was he talking to? Askar could not believe his ears, and listened attentively. No, he was right, there were voices coming from the inner courtyard. Then the speakers apparently went inside and it grew quiet. Askar remained on the roof for a long time, trying to make some sense of what he had heard.

The following day he could not bear it any longer and went to the construction site. From a distance he heard the young people's laughter and saw how hard they were working. "The lucky stiffs, they are already working on scaffolds. They probably feel like tight-rope walkers," he thought enviously. There was Nartaji lumbering up to the bricklayer with cement. He poured some out of the pail and returned, bending the scaffold under his weight. Ozoda was working with the foreman, and was placing bricks as Ashur showed her. He then would correct the brick, explaining how it should be done. Askar watched the master's quick, precise movements with admiration. Then he remembered why he had come, pulled a note out of his pocket, wrapped it around a little stone, and walked faster.

Shakhlo was working in the kitchen washing dishes, and Anzor was chopping onions next to her. Askar was at a loss. He had never expected Anzor to be at the construction site that day too. Nevertheless, he decided to carry out his plan. Standing in the middle of the path, he threw the stone toward Shakhlo. She turned quickly, saw him, and opened her eyes wide

in surprise. If she had not gaped, Anzor wouldn't have noticed. Askar ran down the hill, disappointed. As Shakhlo reached for the wad of paper, Anzor looked around, but no one was anywhere in sight. Askar had already run down the hill, and the others were busy working.

"Ah-ha," Anzor said, snickering. "Someone sent us a love letter."

Shakhlo did not know what to say. Anzor smiled mischievously and stood up, but no matter how he craned his long neck, he saw nothing suspicious. Everyone was where he should be: some were carrying bricks, while others were mixing cement. He was confused: who could have thrown the note?

Shakhlo was embarrassed. In any other situation, she could have put Anzor in his place, but not now. For that reason, she had to smile. He interpreted her smile in his own way, and was pleased. He decided that the following day he would go to the collective farm gardens to the far corner where golden bunches of lady-fingers hung, and pick some of the best for Shakhlo. When you ate them, your tongue stuck to the roof of your mouth from the sweetness. He would treat the visitor.

* * *

That evening, when Shakhlo wanted to go to the place indicated in the note, Munira would not let her out of the house. She began to ask questions, but Shakhlo could not answer since she and Askar had decided not to divulge their secret. Only after Munira promised not to say anything, did she let her read his note, but she refused to explain any more.

"But this isn't to you," Munira laughed after reading the note.

"What do you mean?"

"It is addressed to a *malika.* I don't understand what a princess has to do with anything."

Shakhlo recalled that moon-lit night when she had fallen from the horse after being frightened by the snake, and how Askar had put her in the saddle and led the horse, as if he were the brave shepherd in the fairy tale who feared neither snakes nor other terrors. Askar had called her *malika* several times then. How could she explain that to Munira? And was it explainable?

"He calls me that for a joke," she said.

But Munira still did not want to let her go.

"He writes that he needs to see me tonight!" Shakhlo pleaded. "I have to go. Please understand, Munira, it is very important."

But Munira remained firm. What if Ravshan saw Shakhlo alone by the river when she was supposed to be with Munira? What would his parents think if he told them? And what was so important that Askar had to see her that night? He could have talked to her at the construction site. Just walk right up and talk.

Besides all that, there was another reason Munira was hesitant. "I'll have to tell Shakhlo," she thought.

"Shakhlo, haven't you noticed that Anzor is following you?"

"Me?" Shakhlo laughed.

"Believe me, Shakhlo. He really is."

"Do you know why?"

"No. I noticed it day before yesterday. When you and Ozoda went swimming, he went after you."

"I saw him myself," Shakhlo replied. "So what if he followed us? He didn't come anywhere near us, and went swimming near the bridge."

"He went swimming?" Munira asked. "But he can't swim and is even afraid to go in the water."

"I don't know. We went into the bushes and he stayed near the bridge. What would he do at the river if he wasn't going to swim?"

"You won't laugh if I tell you something?"

"Is it funny?"

Munira was silent a moment, deciding whether to tell her.

"I saw the tea-room keeper give him a sign," she finally said. "After that Anzor decided to go swimming and went after you."

"That can't be true! You must have imagined it."

"I didn't imagine anything! Why should I make something like that up? The tea-room keeper gave him a sign like this," and she moved her arm slightly. "Don't tell me you haven't noticed how he is always following you around."

"You're right!" Shakhlo said with sudden concern.

Until then she had not paid any attention. But Munira had noticed immediately. Shakhlo had not particularly liked Anzor from the first moment she saw him at the river. Then she got to know him better at the construction site and decided there was nothing anyone could do with him since he was crippled. It would not surprise her if he played some practical joke, but the tea-room keeper was another matter! Why did he send Anzor to follow them? The tea-room keeper groveled before Muminjan, and that was probably why he had Anzor watch out for his guest. There could be no other explanation.

"I didn't think you were one to panic," she said to Munira, laughing.

"All right, have it your way," Munira answered, realizing she could not stop Shakhlo. "But if Askar wants to say something.

why don't I get him and bring him here. Do you agree?"

"Fine. But I don't know if he'll come."

Before ten minutes had passed, Munira and Askar appeared on the doorstep. Shakhlo calmed down a little when she noticed he was not angry. Up until then, she felt she had revealed their secret.

Askar told them how he had managed to sneak up to Mulladost's house after a previously unsuccessful attempt, climbed up on the kitchen roof, and overheard a strange conversation between Mulladost and the truck driver.

Munira looked at him doubtfully.

"Askar, you are not fibbing, are you?" she asked.

"Of course not!"

"We can't believe you until you tell us all about your wanderings," Munira continued.

"What wanderings?" Askar asked in surprise.

"Tell us what you were doing at the construction site that night."

"Tell us, Askar," Shakhlo repeated.

He had no choice but to reveal his secret. If he didn't tell now, all their plans would fail. After all, Shakhlo and Munira could help him. But all the same, he did not want to talk about that night. It was embarrassing. What if they laughed?

"Maybe another time," he muttered.

"No, right now."

"Shakhlo, remember what you said the day you went to the tea-room keeper's?" he asked, blushing in embarrassment.

"Did I say something?"

"You have a bad memory," he said, disappointed. "You said you'd like to eat a whole bunch of grapes. And his grapes are wonderful. Better than anyone else's."

"Well, so what if I said that." Suddenly Shakhlo figured it out: "Don't tell me you..."

Askar smiled. Munira had expected him to admit to some crime, but when she realized why he had gone there that night, she could not hold back the laughter.

"You sneak!" she said. "Thief."

Askar was not offended. He felt better, and laughed too.

"I had just made it to the gate and still had to climb on the roof," he continued. "That's when the tea-room keeper came out and almost caught me. He chased me to the bridge. That guy can really run. But he's no match for me."

"Enough bragging, Askar," Munira said. "Let's talk seriously. Maybe he was the one who poured water in the cement hole."

"I thought the same thing," Askar said. "Who knows? It's hard to believe though. After all, he is an adult."

"I was sure you weren't guilty," Shakhlo sighed in relief. "I'll tell everyone tomorrow."

"No one will believe you," Askar said with a bitter smile. "And you'll put me in an awkward position."

"Why?"

"What the tea-room keeper said will sound more convincing, and in general... Think a minute. The day before Ravshan and I quarreled, and he hit me in the leg with a brick on purpose. Then he got scared and played the fool. That means everyone will think I was getting back at Ravshan, and rather successfully, by putting water in the cement. I interfered with work, which Ravshan is responsible for. In other words, there is direct proof of my crime. And the tea-room keeper said he saw me that night. Why did I run away from him? And I did run, that's a fact. No one will believe I went there for grapes!"

"You're right," Munira said. "That is what we all thought. We decided you wanted revenge and turned on the water."

"What will happen now?" Shakhlo looked anxiously at Askar. "They will all continue to think you are guilty."

"That's even better."

"I don't understand."

"Let's not tell anyone about it."

"Why not?" Shakhlo objected. She remembered Muminjan had regretted that Askar was discharged. "I'll explain everything to Muminjan."

"That will be a big help," Askar said sarcastically. "And who do you think he will be the first to tell?"

"I don't know," Shakhlo admitted.

"He'll tell Mulladost," Munira spoke up.

"And the chairman trusts the tea-room keeper," Askar said. "I don't know who did that terrible thing, Mulladost or someone else, but I do know the person who did it is pleased because he pulled one over on everyone. If we begin to stir things up, we could put him on his guard."

"Muminjan won't leave it like that. He'll find the guilty one."

"He'll never find him," Askar objected. "No, the longer they suspect me, the better for us. We can find the real culprit."

"What are you saying, Askar?"

"Try to understand, Shakhlo. It is better for me if everything remains as it is. And for that tea-room keeper to remain calm."

"He's right," Munira said. "There is nothing to be gained in causing a fuss."

"It is even dangerous," Askar said. "What if the tea-room

keeper isn't the one. We could accuse him falsely. Then what would happen? We'd be shamed before everyone."

"Right," Munira nodded. "But we know something about Anzor."

"What's he got to do with it?"

"Let's not talk about that," Shakhlo said. She was uncomfortable that Munira was so worried about her.

But Munira repeated her story about Anzor's strange behavior. Askar did not know whether to believe it or not.

"He does that on orders from the tea-room keeper?" he asked.

"Yes, I saw it. Mulladost gave him a sign which meant go follow her."

"Strange."

Askar fell into thought. He remembered that night on the roof when Mulladost told the truck driver: "The boy doesn't have time..." What doesn't the boy have time for? And who was he? Anzor? Askar was frightened at his own thoughts. No, that conversation couldn't have anything to do with the cement. But why was Anzor following Shakhlo? What did he want from her? Didn't he and the tea-room keeper have anything better to do than to follow visitors around? Maybe Munira imagined it. Whether he liked it or not, he needed the girls' help.

"You two should act like you don't suspect a thing."

"Fine," Shakhlo said.

She remembered Anzor's mockery and felt uneasy. It would be hard to pretend. It was difficult not to tell someone what you thought of him.

"Now we'll move on to the main thing," Askar said, and pulled a folded piece of paper out of his pocket. "Let's examine a document."

"What is it?"

"It is a stenographer's report," Askar winked. "True, I wrote it from memory after the meeting, but I tried not to leave anything out. I have a good memory, you can trust me."

"After what meeting?" Munira asked.

"An ordinary one," Askar said calmly. "Which Mulladost chaired."

Shakhlo and Munira bent over the page with interest.

"This is what the tea-room keeper said," and Askar began to read: " 'I already told you they give us no peace. They're wandering around here at night. It has even become dangerous... And our affairs are going badly...' Well, do you understand anything?"

There was a long silence.

"It seems to me he has no peace because of our construction," Munira spoke first. "After all, he said affairs are going badly. After that night, he probably thinks people are wandering around his house as soon as it gets dark."

"What do you think?" Askar turned to Shakhlo.

"I don't know. Maybe he was talking about something else."

"Well?"

"Read on. He said the boy doesn't have time. What does that have to do with the beginning?"

"A lot," Munira said. "After all, Ravshan is in charge. You sure couldn't call him an adult. He means Ravshan doesn't have time."

"No, Munira, it has nothing to do with Ravshan, or Mulladost would have said he can't manage. Maybe you wrote it down wrong, Askar," Shakhlo said.

"No, I got it all down correctly. Mulladost said exactly that. Listen what he says later. The driver asked him what he should

do and he answered: 'Tell him to be patient a little longer. I'll see you in three days.' What do you think of that?"

"Maybe he means see him at the construction site?" Munira suggested.

"No," Shakhlo said. "If he were talking about the site, why would someone have to be patient?"

"It has nothing to do with our work," Askar said, waving his hand. "Someone must be patient for another reason. And that person lives in town. That is where the truck driver comes from. He left the tea-room keeper's, drove to town, and told someone to be patient, that he'd go again in three days. We have to figure out why the driver comes. What does he know or get from the tea-room keeper? That is the most important thing."

"We can figure it out in three days," Munira said.

"Two days," Askar corrected her. "One day has already passed."

"Askar, you're not going there again?" Shakhlo cried out in fright.

"We have no choice."

"Don't go," she implored. "What if he catches you? Let's tell Muminjan."

"Do you want to ruin everything?" Askar asked angrily.

"How?"

"How, how," he minced. "You know yourself. Why do you always want to go ask Muminjan's advice?"

"If you tell Muminjan, the tea-keeper will never admit he talked to some truck driver," Munira reasoned. "And Askar will be in even bigger trouble. They will think he is a liar too. Think for a minute, Shakhlo. Who will Muminjan believe, the tea-room keeper or Askar?"

At that moment loud voices were heard coming from the neighboring yard. Munira expected Anzor's head to appear above the garden wall, but she was mistaken.

"When will that tea-room keeper be satisfied?" a woman's voice asked angrily. "You take him brushwood every day. Doesn't he have enough?"

"That is Anzor's mother," Munira whispered.

"He is storing up firewood to open a bakery," Anzor laughed.

"That's enough smart talk. Go then, but come back earlier."

Anzor did not answer. They heard the gate close behind him.

"He went for wood again," Munira said. "That tea-room keeper is awfully greedy: half his yard is full of wood."

"Now listen to what comes next," Askar continued. "This has nothing to do with the first conversation. As the driver was leaving Mulladost asked: 'Have you met him yet?' 'Who?' the driver said. 'Oh, him. I haven't even seen him.' 'You make sure you meet him', Mulladost told him. He seemed afraid. I wonder who they were talking about. The tea-room keeper really hates that person, whoever he is. Listen to what he said about him: 'That damn fellow has more lives than a cat. He'll give us problems again, you'll see. We need to do something.' Too bad Mulladost did not say anything more. The person he hates probably lives in town."

"Makes sense," Munira agreed.

"We need to find out who they were talking about," Shakhlo said. "Who could it be?"

"Obviously a fine man," Askar said. "Too bad I don't know his name so I could warn him. I'd sure like to know what the tea-

10 Зак. 0885

room keeper and his friends are up to."

"What a riddle," Munira said dejectedly. "I'm completely confused. It will be hard to figure it all out."

"Not at all," Askar objected. "We just need to find the end of the string and..."

"Just try to find it!"

"I will! You wait and see, I will!" Then Askar unexpectedly turned to Shakhlo. "I think you said you heard Mulladost's aunt talk."

"And you laughed at me."

"I still don't believe it. There was probably someone else inside and you decided the crazy woman was talking. Do you remember what the conversation was about?"

"I think... I think the tea-room keeper asked if it was she, and his aunt, or whoever it was said: 'Yes. As if we didn't have enough problems.' Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Askar said, and he smoothed the lower part of the page. "Another riddle. So the crazy woman, or someone else, saw a person in the village who they aren't happy about. A woman. That means the tea-room keeper is worried about some woman. That is why he asked."

"If that's true, then..." Munira began to think.

"Then you can help me find the end of the string, and together we'll unravel the mystery," Askar interrupted and jumped to his feet.

"I'm with you," Munira agreed.

Shakhlo was silent. She already knew Askar counted on her help from the day they kicked him off the construction crew.

Chapter XV
MAXIM THE BRICKLAYER

Work on the gym was going much better. The construction workers Muidin and Gafur finished up the barn, and came to help Ashur. Work sped along. It was already possible to see what the building was going to look like: large and spacious with thick, high walls.

Ashur spent more time with the young people than did the other bricklayers, teaching them his trade. And he handled Mulladost well. The tea-room keeper no longer commented on the work, and even tried to stay away from the master.

Chairman Muminjan could not help but see and appreciate what the young people were learning from the bricklayer.

"That is really something!" he said to Ashur one day when he came to pay them a visit.

He looked admiringly at his son, who was working on the scaffold like a real construction worker. Where was his mischievousness? His usual flightiness? Where had that industriousness come from? He was very serious. Just like an adult, though his movements were a little hurried and anxious. All that was very familiar to Muminjan. How marvelous when a person discovers the power in his hands and their ability to create!

"Great job, Ashur!" the chairman whispered softly. "It seems you won, my friend."

As it turned out, the stubborn bricklayer was able to channel the turbulent current, as he had called them. After all, Muminjan had been the same when he first climbed a scaffold, and he had been on edge too.

He remembered dropping a brick out of nervousness and hitting the work superintendent on the shoulder. He was a small, fat man with eyes like those of an owl. An unpleasant person. Muminjan thought his name was Nigmat. Yes, that was it, Nigmat. He had not been hurt by the brick. Muminjan was ashamed of his carelessness and went to apologize, but the work superintendent refused to listen. He demanded that the young man be fired. He even threatened to take him to court. That was a long time ago. Muminjan had been a teenager like his son Ravshan. No, he had been even younger. Times were hard. His mother did not sleep at night, and lay awake crying. She said nothing to her son, but Muminian guessed she had received a death notice in the mail. Mirzakadyr, Ashur's father, who had returned from the war with only one arm and leg, got Muminjan a job at the construction site where he was watchman. The work was not considered hard: Muminjan carried bricks up to the top of the scaffold. During the day he worked, and in the evening he studied. But soon he began to watch the bricklayers, examining the even, flawless walls which they were building.

Mirzakadyr's family lived no better than Muminjan and his mother — a watchman's salary was not enough — so Ashur also had to go to work. At first, neither Muminjan nor Ashur thought they would become construction workers. The experienced men worked at a piece-rate, so they had no time to help the young boys. In fact, they avoided the new hands like the plague. But if a young person insisted, they sent him to Maxim, an elderly bricklayer who worked "slowly". Maxim was Russian, but knew the Uzbek language better than many Uzbeks. He was modest, quiet, and apparently not in good health, and he spent a great deal of time with the younger workmen. For that reason,

he received half and sometimes a third of what the others did, but he never complained. The work superintendent laughed at the eccentric old fool who wasted so much time with mere babes, though he did not have the courage to tell Maxim to his face. Nigmat was strange. He never parted with his blue briefcase, as if no one would acknowledge him without it. The workmen even joked that he slept with it. His eyes were constantly tearing, and he wiped them with his hand or his shirt sleeve. Ashur had probably forgotten about him long ago, but neither of them would ever forget Maxim.

One payday the experienced bricklayer and his students received equal amounts.

"See, you have already caught up with me," he joked. "Now you must pass me. What kind of students are you if you don't do better than your teacher?"

That was when Muminjan had seen how a teacher could receive pleasure from his students' successes. Only a sincere, generous person could be so unselfish.

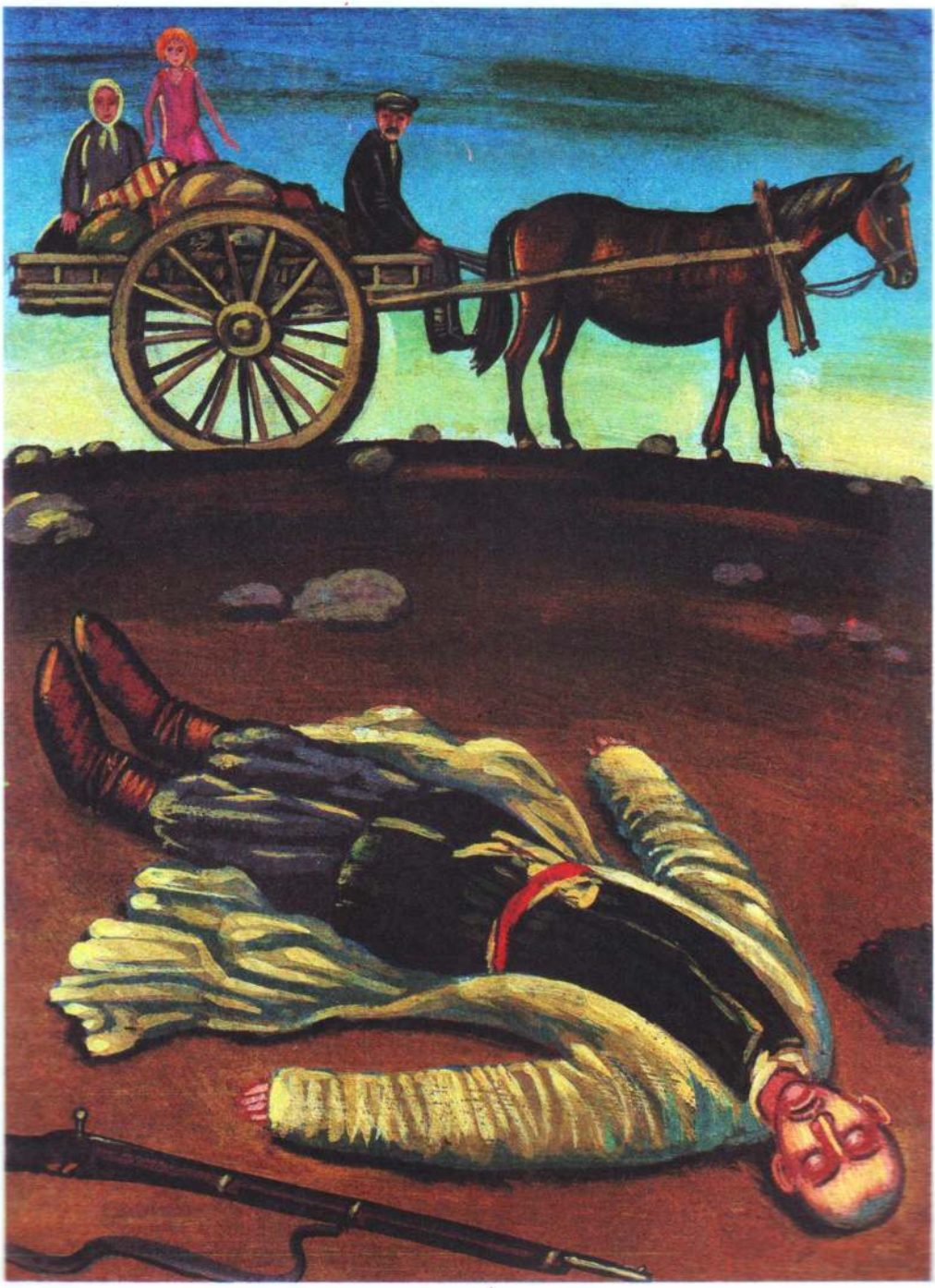
It was difficult for Maxim to work in the winter. When it was cold he suffered from an old wound. Ashur and Muminjan often went to see him. Maxim's wife was very kind and considerate, like Maxim himself. When his friends came to see him, she got so excited she could not do enough for them. The bricklayer did not talk much. He did not like to brag and despised chatterboxes. On rare occasions Maria, his wife, would briefly tell of some incident in his life. The elderly workman did not interrupt her. She told her stories simply, as if she was not talking about her husband, but someone else. Once, when the young people asked about his illness, she told them the following story:

"That is not simply an illness, but a wound from a long

time ago," she said. "Then things were in turmoil, with bandits attacking everywhere. That was when Maxim was seriously wounded. He was shot on the highway, while we were moving to town. It was my idea to move: we had to so our only daughter could continue her education. We did not have many things, just a few bundles, books and an old sewing machine. We packed hurriedly and got under way. We traveled for several days in an old cart. It was a difficult journey and we had to stop frequently so the horse could rest. One night we camped at a large plane tree. Before we managed to unwrap our bundle of food shots rang out. Obviously there was a village nearby and bandits were attacking. My daughter and I wanted to get out of there as fast as we could, but Maxim did not agree. Soon the firing stopped. We stayed where we were.

"In the morning when it got light we saw a man with a gun lying on the ground about a hundred meters from us. He was very young. He had been wounded in the gunfire, had run from his pursuers, and had fallen and lost consciousness. Who was he? He was wearing simple clothes which did not tell us much. Maxim understood what I was thinking. 'It doesn't matter who he is, we should help,' he said. We bound his wound and laid him in the cart. When he regained consciousness he was shocked to see us and even tried to run away, but he realized he was too weak and had to lie back down. We asked him where he was from in order to take him to his family, but he refused to tell us. He said he'd go with us. I thought it was strange: apparently there weren't many bandits and they had probably retreated on meeting with resistance. But if they ran off, why didn't that young man want to return to his village? When I asked him about it he... What was his name, Maxim?"

"Muradulla, I think," Maxim said reluctantly.



"Yes, that was his name. He said they would kill him in the village. As I mentioned, he was very young and we felt sorry for him. We managed to get him back on his feet in a couple of days, and were happy to have a companion with a weapon on our dangerous journey. One night our horse slipped and fell in the middle of the road, and the shaft of the cart broke. At first we thought the horse was lame, but he turned out to be unharmed. You can't imagine how overjoyed we were when we realized that. We spent the night there in an open field. We were terribly thirsty and had to water the horse, so Maxim mounted the animal and went in search of water. The young man went after him. Our daughter and I stayed behind in the dark. Our daughter fell asleep, tired of waiting, but I couldn't close my eyes because I was so worried about my husband and Muradulla. What if they came upon some bandits? Somewhere late that night we heard a shot and the sound of horse's hooves. My daughter and I ran to find Maxim. He lay on the ground with a gunshot wound in his chest. I thought he was already dead, but our daughter listened to his heart, and said he was still breathing. He lost a lot of blood. I don't know how he pulled through. He was bedridden for two months. Then ... then we lost our daughter. She went to a village and never returned. She was the one who cared for Maxim when he was seriously wounded. That old wound still torments him. You know, you can't judge a person at first glance. I never thought when we saved that young man we were harboring a viper in our midst."

Muminjan also recalled the day his mother came to the construction site to see the elderly bricklayer and thank him for his kindness. But he was not there. When they went to his house, they found Maria in mourning. Maxim had died. His wife

soon followed. They both were fine, upright people. Muminjan showed his mother the wall he and Ashur had laid, and she tenderly stroked the cold bricks.

Chapter XVI
THE LETTER

"Dad!" Ravshan called. "Look at my row. What do you think?"

"Not bad, Ravshan," Muminjan said in praise.

Ravshan smiled, tapped the brick professionally, like an experienced bricklayer, and went to get more cement.

Noticing that the chairman was approaching Ashur, Mulladost stepped back into the shade of the kitchen tent and began to slice carrots, in order to listen to what the two men would discuss.

"We don't have much sand left," the master said.

"I've already sent a truck for it," the chairman answered. "And I've asked they cut down several more poplar trees. The logs are also for you."

"Now is the perfect time to cut the trees," Ashur said. "The old timber isn't suitable for construction."

Muminjan stood up, pleased that neither he nor the bricklayer had mentioned their recent disagreement. Before leaving he rummaged around in his pocket.

"There is a letter for you, Ravshan!" he called.

Ravshan quickly opened the envelope. While reading the letter he periodically smiled or grew serious.

The conversation between the master and the chairman put

Mulladost on his guard. He told Anzor to take over in the kitchen and went off somewhere.

"Who is the letter from?" Ozoda asked.

"Guess."

"Tell us, Ravshan," Munira said, coming over to him.

It was the first time she had spoken to him since Askar left. Apparently she was still displeased with him. Ravshan could not refuse. The letter was from their teacher, Usmanali. He wrote almost nothing about himself, but asked many questions about his students. He requested that they write him in detail.

"Maybe we should write a letter now?" Ravshan suggested.

"Great idea," Mirkabul cried. "But only on the condition that we write about everything and leave nothing out."

Ravshan got a pen and paper and handed them to Ozoda.

"Here, you have the best handwriting. Where should we start? Should we put down all we've managed to accomplish? Why aren't you saying anything? Saifi, what do you think?"

Saifi remained silent, which was not like him at all. Usually he supported Ravshan in everything, but now he said nothing. Munira looked down at her feet and smiled, as if waiting for something. Finally Nartaji spoke:

"Are we going to write about Askar?"

"That's up to you," Ravshan said, surprised at such a change in his friends' moods. "We'll do whatever the majority wants."

"Since when?" Ozoda said.

Ravshan looked at her angrily, but did not answer.

"Why are you so surprised, Ozoda?" Mirkabul said. "Ravshan has been like that ever since Askar left."

"Don't get smart, Mirkabul," Ravshan shouted.

"Aren't I telling the truth?"

"If that's what you think, why didn't you defend Askar when I suggested we dismiss him."

"I was a fool, Ravshan. A fool," Mirkabul said. "I didn't know my conscience would bother me. I didn't believe Askar. But now I don't think he could have done such a terrible thing."

"Why?" Ravshan said. "After all, it's been proved."

"But he didn't admit to doing it."

"You think he'd admit it?" Ravshan snickered.

"He said he wasn't guitly, remember?"

"Now you really are talking like a fool," Saifi said. "What idiot is going to admit his crime?"

"You can come up with thousands of witnesses, but I won't believe them," Mirkabul said. "I just feel that Askar didn't do it. He isn't afraid to say when he is wrong. So you write it all down, Ozoda. Briefly, but write our teacher about that too."

"Write about it," Nartaji supported Mirkabul. "Write about everything if that's how we agreed."

"And be sure to write about Ravshan too," Mirkabul added.

"What could she write about me?" Ravshan laughed.

"Don't laugh. There is plenty to write. After all, you were the one he chose as leader. Some leader. You're no more than the tea-room keeper's shadow."

"What!"

"Oh, be quiet," Mirkabul waved his hand. "You're always ready to fight with anyone you don't like or anyone who disagrees with you. As if you are the only smart one, and the rest of us are stupid."

"Do you think I sit around doing nothing," Ravshan shouted. "or work less than you?"

"Don't yell, we aren't deaf," Ozoda interrupted. "Nobody said you worked badly."

"The leader should think about everyone," Nartaji said.

"Don't I think about all of you?"

"You're only concerned about yourself."

"Me?"

"That's right," Mirkabul said. "Tell me, what I am doing here? And Saifi and Nadira and Anzor and all the others? Why does Anzor spend all his time in the kitchen? And why do we just carry bricks and mix cement? You and Ozoda are always by the master. And Nartaji on occasion. But what about the rest of us? If you're about to say that there is only one bricklayer, you're mistaken. Another two have joined us from the barn. They could teach us!"

"He's right," someone said.

"So that's what's bothering you," Ravshan said, trying to smile.

"What if I decide not to come tomorrow?" Mirkabul said. "Who is going to force me?"

"Or me?" Munira said.

Ravshan looked sullenly at Munira. He had not expected she would say something like that. But he realized that Ozoda, Nadira, Saifi and all his other classmates felt the same way.

Anzor sat some distance away, near the pot, enjoying the young people's argument. The tea-room keeper approached, flushed and frightened. He immediately realized what was going on.

"Anzor, serve the pilaf or it will turn to mush," he said loudly.

Anzor stood up and went to get the plates. While Ozoda wrote, the tea-room keeper crept up silently and peeked over

her shoulder. Everyone but Ravshan was pleased with the letter. Shakhlo noticed that Anzor whispered something to Mulladost. She only heard a few words.

"Great, they really gave it to him."

"Not so loud, you ass," the tea-room keeper snapped.

Anzor paled and fell silent.

After lunch Ozoda went to the office to mail the letter. When she returned, she noticed Ravshan was still upset and was sitting off to one side, like a stranger.

Toward evening Mulladost brought the provisions for the following day. He called Ravshan over:

"Are you upset about something, nephew?"

"No, why?"

"Don't hide it. I know everything," Mulladost smiled slyly. He pulled a wrinkled envelope out of his pocket and threw it into the fire. "If that letter upsets you, let it burn. I keep a key to the mailbox in my pocket. You can relax, nephew."

Ravshan was shocked.

Chapter XVII
MYSTERIOUS AFFAIRS CONTINUE

Askar left home as soon as it grew dark. He had to do everything on time, because the tea-room keeper usually sat by the gate before his visitor arrived, and then it would be hard to go unnoticed. True, that day there was a meeting of the collective farm management so Mulladost should still be at the office, but what if he pleaded urgent business and left early?

Askar climbed out on a thick willow branch, and let his legs dangle. From there he could see Munira's house and the light burning over the entrance.

The light flickered two times: that meant Munira had been to the office and made sure the tea-room keeper was still there. Askar had to hurry.

He jumped off the branch and ran across the empty lot. Soon he was at Mulladost's house. Before climbing on the roof, he stood for a moment to catch his breath and to look around. No one had seen him. As he climbed the vine, something rustled. He remembered the cat and looked around, but saw nothing. He lay on the flat surface and listened.

The rustling came again. Askar looked down, frightened. The demented aunt was wandering around in the outer courtyard. What a strange woman! It was dark and here she was looking for something in the brushwood. "Poor thing," Askar thought. "If she were normal, would she be sticking her arm in a bunch of dry branches? There's nothing there."

He heard a knock at the gate. The aunt froze. The knock came again. The woman hurried over to open it, almost tripping over her long dress. "He's here," Askar thought. "Left the office and came home." The tea-room keeper and his aunt entered the house in silence.

Askar had figured someone would come see Mulladost, but who? That same driver who was there three days before, or someone else? What if they had made other arrangements when they went outside?

Suddenly Askar thought he felt the vine move, as if someone were pulling on it from below. He crawled to the edge of the roof and bent over to look. A boy was crawling up the vine. Askar was stunned. In his fright he lost his balance and fell

on the figure below. The boy weaved, but did not lose his grip on the vine. Askar hit the ground, but immediately sprang up and leaped on the intruder's shoulders. The stranger tried to shout, but Askar managed to cover his mouth. His opponent elbowed him in the ribs with all his might, and threw him off his shoulders. Askar prepared to defend himself but strangely enough, the other did not attack.

"Are you crazy?" the boy whispered. "What did you jump on my head for?"

"Mirkabul, is that you?"

It was Mirkabul, though he looked like a giant in the dark. He laughed softly and asked Askar what he was doing there.

Askar motioned for him to be quiet. He looked around and then spoke:

"Are you spying on me?" he whispered reproachfully.

"No, of course not!" Mirkabul said. "I was just walking by, I swear. I saw you run over here as if someone was chasing you, so I followed. It was only when you climbed up on the roof I realized why you had hurried here. For the grapes, right?"

"You got it all wrong, but now is not the time to explain. Go to the river, climb a tree and hide. Soon a truck from town will drive up. Find out who is in the cab, and watch what they bring in and carry out. Got that?"

"O. K. I'll go."

"Don't leave until I get there. Stay in the tree."

"O. K."

Askar climbed back on the roof. Mirkabul found a small cobble-stone and handed it to Askar when he peeked over the edge. He took the stone: it might come in handy. If they found

him, he would throw it and get out of there before they realized what had happened.

He heard the sound of a motor in the distance. The door to the house opened and Mulladost came out with a small, low table and a rug. He spread the rug on the *supa*, put the table on top, and went back inside for a tablecloth and food. Apparently, he planned to meet his visitor outside. Finally the truck driver appeared.

Askar waited with bated breath for them to start talking, but heard nothing. Then he noticed the sound of dry twigs snapping. Strange, but Mulladost and the truck driver were also rummaging around in the brushwood. No, they were gathering it up. In thirty minutes everything grew quiet. Obviously they had sat down to eat.

"Take all we have," the tea-room keeper said.

"I'm not about to go back empty-handed," the truck driver laughed. "It's a long way to your village and we need to cover expenses."

"I know it's not much, but the boy doesn't have time. I already told you."

They fell silent. Askar thought they were probably talking about the brushwood. So, Anzor couldn't transport it fast enough. The tea-room keeper said something and the truck driver laughed.

"I'm late," he said. "I'll just have a cup of tea. How is your aunt?"

"Not very good," Mulladost said. "Old age is making itself felt. I wanted to take her to town for a week, but the chairman won't give me the time off. Poor thing, she can't stand the noise from the construction."

"I can imagine," the driver laughed. "You really haven't done anything about that?"

"No," Mulladost said. "I tried, but nothing worked. They keep on anyway."

"The construction!" Askar thought. "That means Mulladost was the one trying to stop the work! He poured the water in the hole! Now I'm sure of it!"

Askar became all ears.

"It's a pity," the driver said. "I already met that man."

"Really!" Mulladost cried.

"Yes, don't act so surprised."

"Well, what did you find out?" the tea-room keeper asked anxiously.

"He's planning to come to the village."

"What!" Mulladost cried out in fear. "Stop him! He should not come. We have enough trouble without him."

It was unfortunate the tea-room keeper was so shaken by the unexpected news, for the next few sentences he said almost in a whisper.

"You are a strange man," the truck driver commented. "How can I prevent him if he wants to come. He'll find a way without me."

The tea-room keeper was silent for a long time. It seemed he was very frightened.

"I'll be right back."

Askar had to wait twenty minutes until he returned.

"All right, let him come," he said. "But try to bring him here in your truck. And at night."

"Leave it to me," the driver said.

"He'll be our guest!" Mulladost said meaningfully. "We'll entertain him as best we can."

They went outside the gate. Five minutes later the truck left. The tea-room keeper did not wait outside as usual but hurried

back into the courtyard.

When Askar reached the willow, Mirkabul leaped down.

"What did he carry off?" Askar asked.

"Brushwood."

"Brushwood?" Askar repeated in surprise.

"Yes, Askar. The truck was full of branches."

"That means he transports the brushwood that Anzor brings into town. Strange, but true. Let's go, Mirkabul."

"Where?"

"Don't ask, you'll find out soon enough," Askar said, and walked away briskly.

Slightly puzzled, Mirkabul followed in silence. He was quite surprised when they approached Munira's house. When he realized she knew what was going on, he grew angry.

"Why didn't you tell anyone about your suspicions? Why didn't you defend Askar? Were you afraid of hurting Ravshan?"

"No, Mirkabul, ask Askar."

"It is better if everything stays as it is," Askar laughed. "You understand? Now the end of the string is in our hands."

The young people felt they were about to undergo a serious test. When Askar told them about the tea-room keeper's conversation with the truck driver, they all realized it was Mulladost who had disrupted the construction. He wanted to stop the work and had tried to create discord among the young people. It was in his interest that the chairman stopped believing in them. Then he had poured water in the hole with cement. Now all that was clear.

But something else bothered them. Did the driver really come all the way from town just for brushwood? Who was the boy who couldn't manage? Why did they need brushwood in town? All of that was very strange. And they still did not know who

Mulladost and the truck driver were talking about. Why were they so afraid of him? Who was the man the driver had to stop?

"He probably suffered at the hands of the tea-room keeper and if he comes here, Mulladost will be in hot water," Munira said.

"I think you're right," Askar agreed. "But I'm more concerned with Mulladost's behavior. Apparently he talked with his aunt when he went inside, and then came out and told the driver to bring the man in his truck and preferably at night."

"It looks like his aunt understands everything," Shakhlo said.

"Sure does," Askar nodded.

"What could his aunt have said?" Mirkabul wondered.

"I don't know. But he definitely talked to her. Then he came out and told the driver they would entertain the man."

"It's all clear," Mirkabul said.

"What is?" Askar turned to him. "Explain it to us."

"I think the tea-room keeper wants to bribe that man. It would be easy for him: he'd just send Anzor for fruit from the orchard — a perfect bribe."

"Fruit?" Askar repeated. "Do you realize what you are saying?"

"Of course, fruit," Shakhlo answered for Mirkabul. "He'd only have to give him two or three crates of grapes."

Askar suddenly struck himself on the head.

"What a dunce!" he cried. "Why didn't I think of that before? What fool transports brushwood to town when they have gas stoves? Anzor takes fruit to the tea-room keeper. Yes, that's it! Shakhlo and Mirkabul, you are great! They must cover the fruit with brushwood. That was why his aunt was fumbling around in the sticks."

"Anzor?" Munira did not want to believe it. "You don't really think he..."

"Yes, he steals," Askar said assuredly. "It looks like his father and the tea-room keeper are in cahoots." Askar took his report of the conversation between Mulladost and the truck driver out of his pocket. "Now we can figure everything out. Ever since we started work on the gym, it's been hard for the tea-room keeper to receive the fruit and send it to town. He thinks people are wandering around near his house and watching him. We were off track when we guessed what the words 'the boy doesn't have time' meant. We thought he was talking about Ravshan. He meant Anzor. He doesn't have time to bring the fruit! Now he can only steal at night. During the day everyone is at the construction site and would wonder why he was always coming with brushwood."

"We need to stop him!" Shakhlo said. "Tomorrow we'll take him to the chairman."

"No, that won't work," Askar disagreed. "He'll never admit it. We need to catch him with the goods at the scene of the crime."

"That's what I like," Mirkabul said.

"It won't be hard to catch Anzor now," Askar continued. "But we should wait. The tea-room keeper could get scared, and then we'll never know who is supposed to come visit him."

"That's right," Mirkabul said with regret. "But Askar, we don't know when that man is coming."

"What do you mean we don't know. He will be on that truck."

"Will we stand guard?"

"Yes," Askar said. "That's no problem. Let's decide whether to tell the others or not."

Askar doubted they would believe him. By the looks of it,

Mulladost was very sly. They would have to catch him red-handed so he couldn't deny it. Therefore, it would be better to remain silent for now.

They divided up the responsibilities: Askar would stand guard on the roof and Mirkabul would sit in the tree. That was in case they noticed Askar. If something happened, he could give a signal with a pocket flashlight, and Mirkabul would come to his aid. But first they had to be sure what was under the brushwood. What if they were wrong? That task was assigned to Mirkabul and Shakhlo who "had been friendly" with Anzor the last few days. He wouldn't suspect her of anything.

* * *

The next evening, Shakhlo went outside. Anzor should be passing by at any moment on his donkey. She was a little nervous, though her assignment was fairly simple. In order to look nonchalant she brought several apples and ate them as she walked. The village was deserted. The only sound was the noise of trucks across the river. She relaxed. Mirkabul was following her about a hundred paces behind, just in case something happened.

It was a good thing Munira's mother was on duty at the hospital that night. Munira had taken her some dinner. Shakhlo planned to tell Anzor that she was worried about her friend who hadn't returned yet, and was going after her. And the hospital was located right across from the gates to the collective farm orchards. She wondered why they hauled the fruit all the way to the tea-room keeper's house. It was so far. They could have picked it up directly from the orchard. But that was also dangerous. Anzor's father was not the only one there — an elderly gardener worked with him. If a truck drove up every week, that gardener

would get suspicious. Anzor was another matter. No one would think he was stealing in broad daylight.

Anzor appeared on the road as soon as she crossed the bridge. Shakhlo again felt nervous and looked back. No, you couldn't see Mirkabul. He was probably hiding behind a plane tree. Anzor stopped his donkey upon seeing her. He was surprised to meet her on the road. Shakhlo came closer and patted the donkey on the back.

"You have a pretty donkey, Anzor."

"A thoroughbred," Anzor grinned. "The only one in the village."

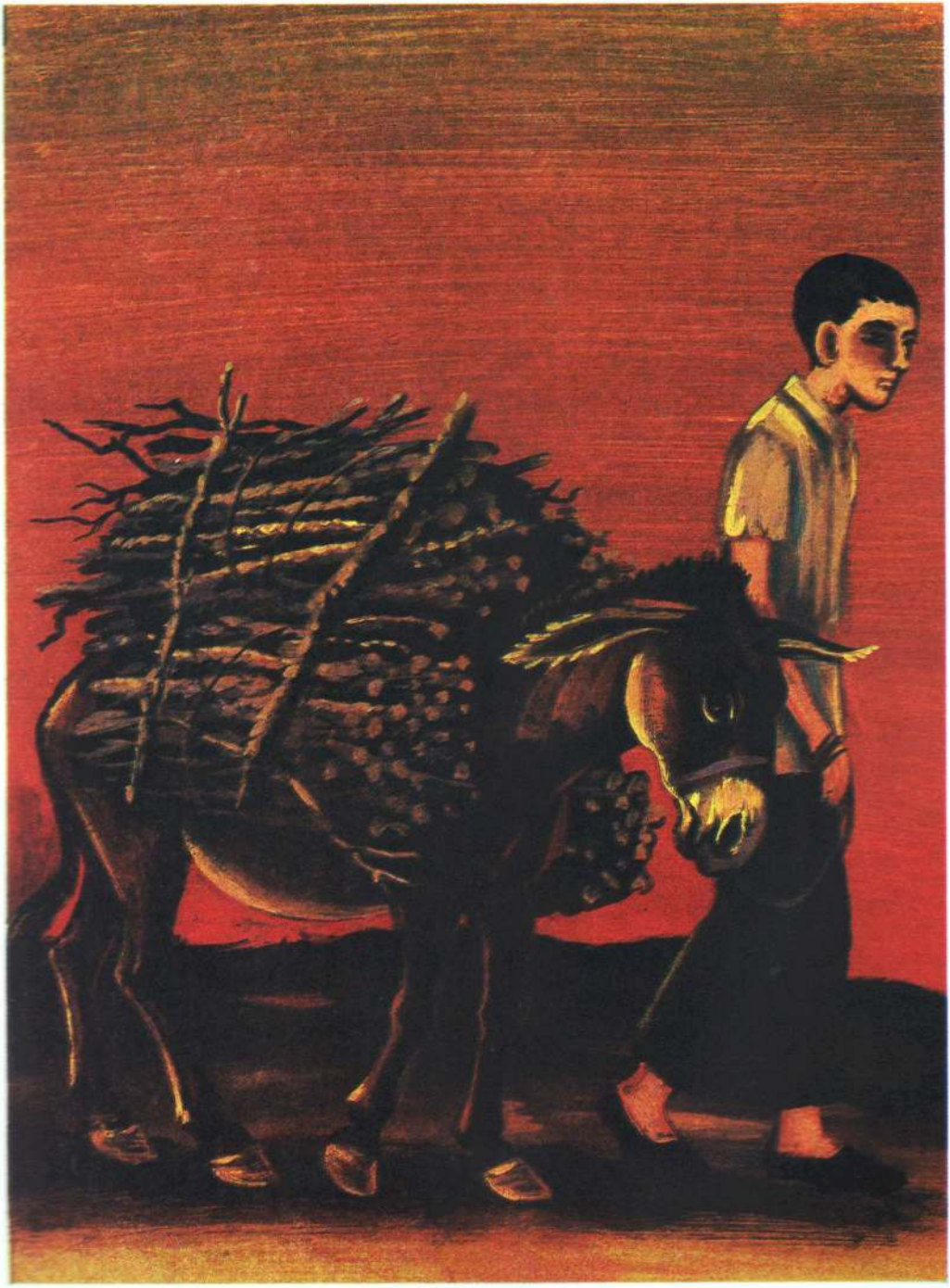
"So are you," Shakhlo wanted to say. Anzor was pleased, as if the praise had been directed at him and not his donkey. Shakhlo did not let the chance slip by and began to talk about the grapes which, according to Anzor, were so sweet your tongue stuck to the roof of your mouth. Anzor melted.

"Are you afraid to go into the orchards?" he said, gesturing toward the gate.

"No, I'm not afraid if you take me," Shakhlo said hurriedly, pleased that everything was going so well.

According to their plan, she was to send Anzor for the grapes in the orchard, and check to see what was under the brushwood as soon as he left. They had another variation in which Anzor would forget his caution and offer Shakhlo the grapes that were under the brushwood. But Anzor responded unexpectedly, and things took a different turn. "If only Mirkabul is right behind me," she thought.

Anzor tied his donkey to a poplar tree and took Shakhlo to the orchards. Would Mirkabul have time to check? What if Anzor turned around and saw him? But Shakhlo had no reason to worry. He was so pleased with her request that he even



hurried. He had his left hand in his pocket. It looked like he wanted to take something out, but hadn't made up his mind.

"I ... I wrote a poem about grapes," he finally said.

"Oh, you write poetry," Shakhlo said feigning surprise.

The poor poet took his crumpled creation out of his pocket and handed it to Shakhlo. She began to read, but he waved his hands in despair.

"Not now, not now! Read it at home."

In his turmoil he forgot where they were going. He turned and saw Mirkabul fumbling around in the brushwood. He swore and ran back.

* * *

Resting his chin on a stone, Askar watched Mulladost's courtyard. The tea-room keeper had gone inside a short time before and had not come back out. His aunt was in the kitchen. Up until then, Askar had not paid any attention to her, but now, after learning she could talk, he began to suspect her too. What was she doing in there? Askar did not dare look through the flue. It was a moonlit night and in the kitchen where it was dark it would be easy to see someone looking down from the roof. She couldn't be doing anything so important to risk being caught in such a crucial moment. He had even begun to think the visitor from town would not arrive that night. The tea-room keeper did not come out of the house, while his aunt was busy in the kitchen. It definitely did not look as if they were expecting anyone.

The door squeaked softly and Anzor saw the tea-room keeper's long shadow in the patch of light coming from the open door. The shadow was still for a long time, then Mulladost stepped

outside and spoke to his aunt who had come out into the yard.

"I'm going to have a look."

The demented woman followed him to the gate and locked it behind him. Askar decided the tea-room keeper was going to meet Anzor. Shakhlo was probably already laughingly telling Mirkabul how she outwitted Anzor, and Mirkabul, sitting in the tree... But wait, what if they hadn't had time and would run into Mulladost?

Almost half an hour passed and the tea-room keeper still did not return. Finally there was a knock. The aunt hurried to the gate. Mulladost had returned. He sat down on the edge of the *supa*.

"The worthless pup is nowhere to be found. What could have happened to him?"

The demented woman burst into hoarse laughter. It was the first time Askar had heard her laugh and he was frightened. So she really did understand everything. Now Askar was sure the tea-room keeper had passed his aunt's orders on to the truck driver about bringing the visitor at night.

"Maybe I should bring the gardener here?" Mulladost said after a pause. "If he knows what we want him for, he'll never come. You could threaten to kill him and he wouldn't budge. If his son were here, I'd have the boy tell him to hurry, but the little fool is late. I'd better go myself."

The demented woman stood in front of the *supa* and did not utter a word. It was hard to understand whether she agreed with Mulladost's decision. The tea-room keeper stood up, but hearing the sound of a distant motor, scurried about anxiously and then sat back down.

Askar was as upset as Mulladost. He was worried about

Anzor most of all. Why hadn't he come? Did Shakhlo and Mirkabul give themselves away? Then everything would fail, and those suspicious characters would bury themselves in their dens, never to come out. Askar thought about going for help, but decided to wait. The main thing was not to panic. He must sit tight until the right moment. Mirkabul should already be sitting in the tree. As soon as the truck arrived, Mulladost would go out to meet it and then Askar could climb down and give the signal.

That was his only hope. He would give the signal and Mirkabul would come. It wouldn't be so terrifying together.

The sound of the truck neared. The demented woman returned to the kitchen, and Mulladost bustled about even more than before, as if his house were on fire. Askar had never seen him so agitated. He realized that something out of the ordinary was about to happen. If only Mirkabul was where he should be!

Chapter XVIII
THE TEA-ROOM KEEPER'S VISITOR

As soon as Anzor started back, Mirkabul realized there was no sense in running or hiding behind a tree, so he remained standing next to the donkey.

"What are you doing here?" Anzor asked. His eyes almost popped out of his head. "Why are you messing with my brushwood?"

"I didn't touch your brushwood."

"You did!"

"Don't be ridiculous," Mirkabul said, and took a step forward,

clenching his fist. He knew Anzor was a coward, and had decided to act threateningly. "What would I want with your brushwood?"

"Why did you touch my load?"

"Now that's another question," Mirkabul answered with a sly smile. "You, my friend, know I don't need brushwood. Why don't you offer me some of the grapes that are hidden under the branches?"

"What?"

Anzor dropped the bridle and was about to run away, but Mirkabul managed to trip him, and Anzor fell to the ground.

"You fool! Where are you running? You think I'm going to lead your donkey?"

Anzor stood up. As he brushed the dust from his clothes he cursed himself for his stupidity. He should have sensed it was a trap. Why had he gotten so excited when Shakhlo appeared on the road? What would happen now? He couldn't return to the orchard or go on to the tea-room keeper's. And there was no one to call for help. That would only ruin things. After all, the tea-room keeper told him to bring the stuff later in the evening. Maybe Mulladost knew something? But Anzor had delivered the goods at that same time before, and even unloaded them if Mulladost wasn't home. He had wanted to deliver them and get home early. No matter what, he must stall for time: the tea-room keeper could show up at any minute on his way to meet him.

"Let's go, Anzor," Mirkabul said.

"Where?"

"You'll see."

Mirkabul pulled on the donkey's rope, and Anzor silently plodded along behind him. He realized he had almost made a

big mistake by trying to run away. That would have made things worse. Then he would have given himself away. Now there was still time to think of something.

He broke out in a cold sweat when Mirkabul began to cross the bridge.

"I'm not going anywhere!" he said in a quivering voice.

Mirkabul was just as upset as Anzor. He was afraid the tea-room keeper would appear at any minute. And where could he take Anzor and his donkey? To the office? No, that was no good, they could run into Mulladost there, too. The best thing would be to pick some secluded spot and then decide what to do next.

"Fine, you can stay here," Mirkabul said angrily.

Anzor did not know what to do. He was sure he was being taken to the chairman, but when Mirkabul led the donkey ten paces further, Anzor ran up in despair, and began pulling on the donkey's tail with all his might.

The poor beast was not used to such handling, and after fidgeting as if something was tickling him, he moved on. "You dumb donkey," Anzor thought. "You'll go with whoever leads you." He kicked the animal in the belly in annoyance, and the donkey leaped forward.

"Good for you, Anzor," Mirkabul said. "You would have made a fine drover."

They crossed the bridge and saw Munira and Shakhlo waiting by the side of the road. Anzor realized that even the tea-room keeper couldn't help him now.

Mirkabul stopped at the place where Munira usually swam and tied the donkey to a bush. Then he took Anzor to a nearby clearing.

"Well, let's begin," he said seriously, preparing to cross-

examine Anzor. "Be straight with us and we'll let you go, otherwise we'll take you to the chairman."

"All right," Anzor agreed.

"Where were you delivering the grapes?"

"To you," Anzor giggled strangely.

"What?"

"That's right, Mirkabul, I was taking them to you guys at the construction site," Anzor said, clinging to that helpful lie. "I was supposed to deliver them tomorrow morning, but I decided not to wait. Ask the chairman if you don't believe me."

"Oh, so that's it," Mirkabul said, continuing to play the fool. "Then it doesn't make any difference if we eat them tomorrow or right now."

He walked over to the ladened donkey, pulled out a large bunch of grapes, and divided it equally.

Anzor watched him carefully. It looked as if things weren't hopeless: they had come upon him accidentally. And the chairman himself had told his father to give the young people a crate of grapes a day. True, Anzor was carrying more, but that was no problem. He'd say it was for his friends. The chairman would have to believe him since nothing was too good for friends. It seemed Mirkabul was convinced. Would he be sitting there so calmly if he had guessed the truth?

"Ahhh," Shakhlo exclaimed, smacking her lips. "Absolutely delicious."

"Anzor, you are really something," Mirkabul said. "Wonderful grapes."

But his thoughts were concentrated on other matters. What could he do with Anzor — the guy was like a stone around his neck. How could he let Askar know what had happened? Should he leave the girls with Anzor and go to the tea-room keeper's

house himself? But what if Anzor made a run for it? The main thing now was for him to think they had come upon him by chance. The truck hadn't arrived yet, so maybe Askar will be held up, too.

"You know, Anzor even wrote a poem about these sweet grapes," Shakhlo said, and she took the crumpled paper out of her pocket. Anzor tried to grab it away from her, but Mirkabul stopped him.

"Read it," Mirkabul said. "Only try to do it with feeling. You don't want to offend the poet."

Anzor covered his face with his hands. Shakhlo unfolded the paper and began to read in the light of the moon:

If you're asked about your eyebrows,
Why they are as black as night,
Don't reveal you color them,
To make your eyes shine extra bright.

If it's grapes that you desire
Know Anzor is always there
You to him are the Earth's center,
Gaze on him with tender care.

If you say that you are craving,
Golden grapes so honey sweet.
Ne're forget it's I who know,
Where such grapes the gardener keeps.

"Oh my!" Mirkabul exclaimed. "Pretty fancy stuff."

"He probably stole it from somewhere too," Shakhlo said angrily, and tossed the paper at Anzor. But she immediately recovered it and ran her eyes hurriedly over the lines, blinking in surprise.

"Anzor, did you write this yourself? Is this your handwriting?"

Anzor could not refute his own creation, and nodded. Shakhlo's expression changed and she flew at him. He stepped back in fright, but Shakhlo managed to grab him.

"You wrote this? In your own hand?"

"Shakhlo, what is the matter with you?" Mirkabul intervened. He wanted to separate them, but Shakhlo tightened her grip and began to shake Anzor.

"So it was you who wrote that letter to Salijan Rakhmanov! Admit it!"

Anzor's eyes opened wide.

"Let me go! I don't know anybody by that name!"

"Liar!" Shakhlo said. "You are a liar. I recognized your handwriting. The round end of the 'k'. I saw the letter you wrote!"

Anzor pushed Shakhlo away and was about to run, but Mirkabul grabbed him from behind and prevented him from going anywhere. Anzor kicked and hit at him, but Mirkabul did not loosen his hold. Finally, Anzor grew quiet and dropped to the grass. Mirkabul took off his belt and bound the boy's hands. Anzor wanted to scream, but the cry stuck in his throat.

"Don't move," Mirkabul threatened. "There is no sense in yelling. Nobody can help you now. Your father and the tea-room keeper have both been apprehended."

That had a magic effect on Anzor and he shrank. If his hands had not been tied, one might have thought the boy was simply lying in the grass admiring the moonlit night.

Shakhlo was busy with her own thoughts. She realized Salijan's letter had not gotten lost, but had fallen into Mulladost's hands. He had dictated the letter to Anzor and someone else, probably the truck driver, had delivered it to Salijan's address. Salijan had been right to wonder why there was no envelope.

At that moment they heard a truck motor. Shakhlo ran off. Mirkabul did not know whether he should go to the tree or... No, he had to go. But what could he do about Anzor? Finally he broke off a thick branch and held it out to Munira.

"Hit him if he tries to get away!"

He did not even ask whether Munira agreed to remain. There was no time. He gave her the stick and ran to the river.

* * *

As soon as the truck pulled up, Askar cautiously climbed down the vine. He was shaking all over, as if in a fever. He turned the flashlight off and on several times, which was the signal they had agreed upon. Mirkabul should be able to see it from the tree.

He heard someone bustling about, and then the truck door slammed and the truck drove away.

When Askar climbed back on the roof, the courtyard was deserted. Strange, where had the tea-room keeper's guest gone? Why had the truck left in such a hurry? Maybe something had frightened them? Where was Mulladost? Had he gone inside with his aunt? If that was the case, the truck driver had come only to tell them their guest was held up, so Mulladost wouldn't worry.

He heard what sounded like a weak moan and a hoarse cough coming through the flue. A light went on in the kitchen. Soon the tea-room keeper and his aunt came out.

"I'm going!" Mulladost said. "It looks like that damn gardener is trying to pull one over on us."

While the demented woman and the tea-room keeper talked, Askar quietly peeked through the flue and almost cried out in

horror. A man lay on the kitchen floor, bound with thick ropes! Who was he? He couldn't be Mulladost's guest! Nobody would treat a guest like that. Maybe they began to quarrel and had tied him up until he calmed down. But that was absurd. There was something dangerous going on here. He should send Mirkabul for help and remain himself.

The aunt soon returned to the kitchen. She bent over the person lying on the floor and slapped his face several times. The strange man came to and looked at the woman's wrinkled face in surprise.

"Where am I? Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me? But it was you who wanted to see me."

"I don't understand."

"I don't know why not. You came here to find people from your childhood. Isn't that right, sonny?"

"You ... you are the demented woman!"

"Yes, you are right, sonny."

Askar couldn't believe his ears. The aunt's voice was strange, and resembled a man's. And she pronounced her words very distinctly. Askar's first impulse was to jump down from the roof and get away as fast as he could, but he contained himself. He had to stay put. Soon Mirkabul would come and it wouldn't be so terrifying when there were two of them. He'd send for help. He couldn't leave the man alone. They might kill him!

Askar peeked through the flue again.

"Where am I?" the man asked. "Why am I tied up?"

"Don't be afraid, sonny. I'm right here."

"You can talk now."

"Allah giveth and he taketh away. Sometimes he does the opposite. Long ago he denied me the power of speech, and

then he returned it. On seeing you I immediately recalled my youth. It is depressing, sonny. Those were wonderful times, but they have all passed. It is as if it happened only yesterday. I remember how the collective farm storehouse, where your father was watchman, burned down. Someone hit him and he lost consciousness. Then they set fire to the storehouse..."

"Who?" the man shouted. "Who did that?"

The demented woman laughed.

"Then, when they wanted to take the *ishan's* courtyard, that very courtyard where you are now, someone sawed through the piles of the bridge and your father and his cart fell into the river. If he hadn't stuck his nose in where it didn't belong, he would have remained alive. He didn't even have time to cry out. And don't you remember what happened to you on your way to town?"

"I fell off the cart."

"No, that happened later. Didn't you meet someone?"

"Yes, I met a man. He asked for a lift to the main road."

"What a memory you have," the woman said. "And I remember how that man hit you on the head from behind."

"You ... how do you know all that?"

"Calm down, sonny. Don't be in such a hurry," she said softly. "Soon you'll meet the son of that villain and everything will be clear. There is no point in asking me any more, I won't tell you. Lie still, Salijan."

Only now did Askar understand who they were holding in the kitchen.

"Salijan!" he shouted.

The aunt started at the unexpected cry, and looked up. When she saw Askar above the flue, she leaped to her feet, but Askar managed to pick up his stone and fling it at her.

She fell with a loud cry. Askar tore the cover off the flue, leaped through the large opening, and hurriedly began to untie Salijan's hands.

Chapter XIX
"THE DEMENTED WOMAN"

There was hothing unexpected in the fact that Salijan appeared in the village, so we will not linger on the events preceding his trip.

Shakhlo had anticipated his arrival, but she never thought he would come at night, and fall into the hands of Mulladost and the demented woman. We will describe a little of that.

A few days before, Salijan met a young man, a truck driver, who, as he later learned, had a friend in the same village Salijan was planning to visit. You can imagine how pleased Salijan was at such a happy coincidence. What happened was this: that evening, on returning from the tea-room, he saw a truck skid and go off the road and into a canal. The driver tried to get it out, but nothing worked. Salijan took pity on him, and went to get a shovel from home. The two of them widened the bank of the canal and the driver was able to drive his truck out. The man parked the truck a short distance away and returned to put the canal bank back in order, though Salijan assured him it wasn't necessary. Salijan then invited him to his home, and the young driver accepted readily. The host served tea and they got to talking. The driver told him a little about himself, and also mentioned he was about to go to the village to visit a friend. When he learned Salijan was planning to go to the same place, he offered to take him.

The following day at noon, the considerate truck driver came to pick Salijan up. The teacher was overjoyed and climbed into the cab.

They had gone about half the distance when the motor sputtered several times and died. The driver went to check under the hood and came back a few minutes later.

"It will take awhile to fix the motor. Maybe I should put you on a bus. I have no right to make you wait. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry, I'm in no hurry. I'll wait while you fix it."

The driver got to work on the motor. Salijan would have been glad to help, but he did not understand the first thing about engines. It was dark by the time the motor again hummed merrily. The driver told Salijan to climb in and they continued on their way.

They reached the village late that evening, and Salijan could not recognize a thing. He did not even know where to spend the night.

"Why don't we stick together a little longer," the driver suggested, as if guessing his thoughts. "Where will you go this time of night? And my friend is expecting me. I told him I was coming today. Why don't you stay with him, and decide what to do in the morning."

Salijan agreed. Suspecting nothing, he calmly walked through the gate and was met by an equally considerate friend...

* * *

As soon as Askar untied Salijan's hands and feet, the teacher hurried out of the kitchen. Askar glanced at the demented

woman, but she lay motionless, as if unconscious. "Let her lie there," he thought. "She deserves it." As he walked over to Salijan, the gate opened and Shakhlo ran in.

"Salijan!"

The teacher could not believe his eyes.

"Is it really you, Shakhlo?"

When the girl had calmed down, Salijan told them about the truck driver and what he had learned from the old woman. The chairman and others arrived.

"Where is the tea-room keeper?"

"He went for the gardener," Askar said.

"We'll wait here," the chairman said. "Only let's not make a racket."

Everyone entered the kitchen where the demented woman lay. She moaned and slowly opened her eyes, but seeing people gathered, closed them again. They carried her outside and laid her on the *supa*.

The gardener appeared. When he saw the chairman and the others he stopped in confusion.

"Well, Turdykul, tell us everything," the chairman said.

Salijan looked at the thin man with a thick stubble on his face.

"Turdykul, is it you?" he asked.

"Do you know him?" Muminjan asked in surprise.

"Yes," Salijan answered. "We grew up together."

The gardener stood motionless and was silent. Mirkabul came through the gate. Askar ran over to him and the two of them went back outside the gate.

"Where's the tea-room keeper?" the chairman asked.

"He left in the truck," the gardener said hollowly.

"Where was the truck waiting for him?"

"At the hospital."

"Why did you come here?"

"I'm looking for my son."

"Maybe you'll tell us what your son carries at night?"

The gardener froze.

"Brushwood," he said. "You gave Mulladost permission yourself."

"What else?"

"Nothing else. Only brushwood."

"Why are you looking for your son here? Apparently he did not come tonight."

"The tea-room keeper said Anzor had hurt his leg and he had brought him here. That's why I hurried."

At that moment Munira and Anzor entered one after the other. They were followed by a smiling Mirkabul leading the donkey. On seeing his father, Anzor broke into sobs. Turdykul hurried toward the gate, but the chairman shouted at him to stop.

"The tea-room keeper," the gardener muttered, and then sat down. "I'll bash his face in..."

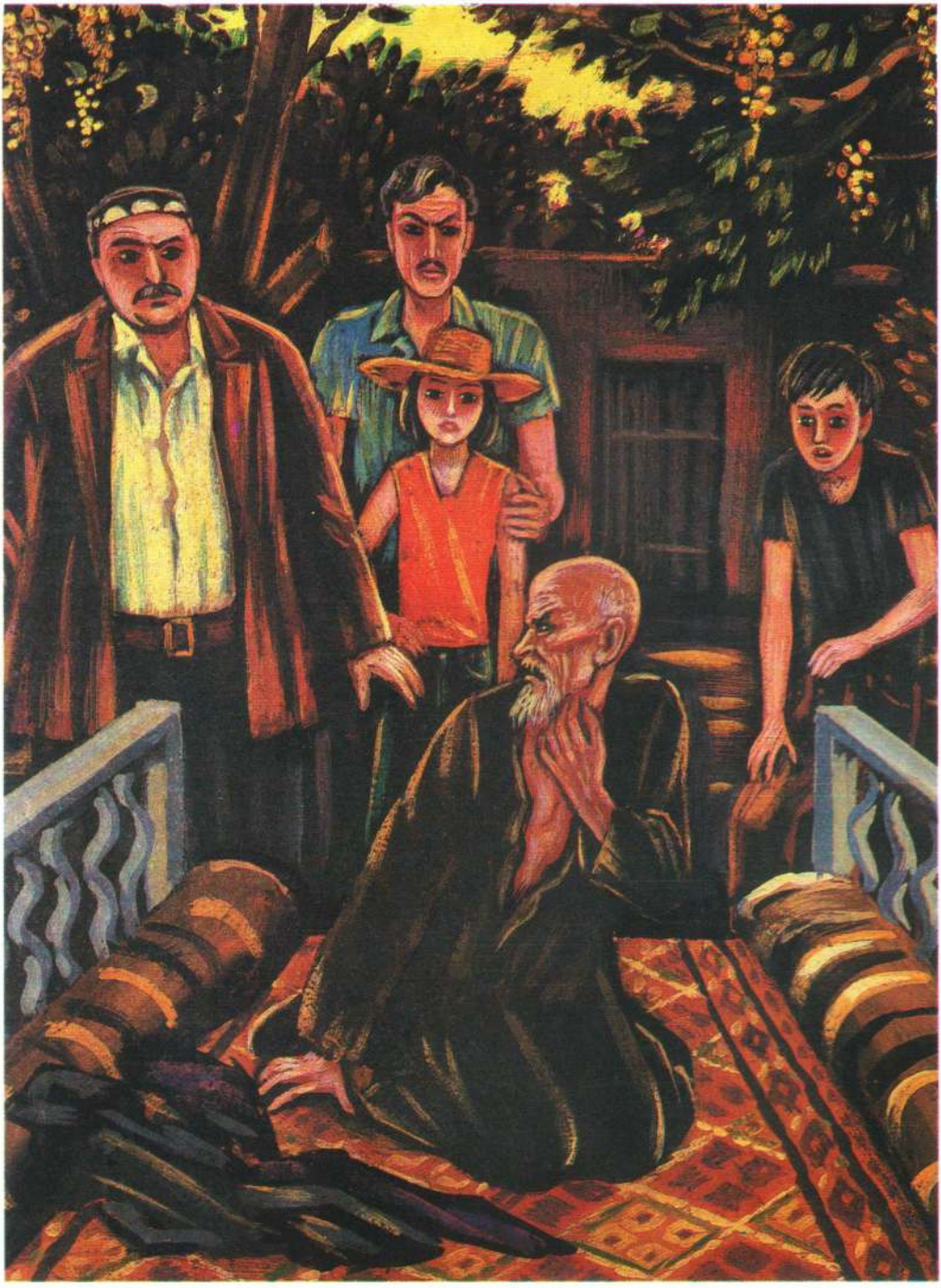
"No need," the chairman said. "He got away for now, but he won't go far."

The chairman gestured to Mirkabul, who quickly removed the bundles of brushwood, uncovering two crates full of grapes.

"This is the first I've heard of heating with grapes," Muminjan said. Then he nodded toward Salijan. "What were you going to do with him?"

"I don't know," Turdykul said, breaking out in a cold sweat. "Why don't you ask that person over there!"

The demented woman lay on the *supa*, her eyes riveted on the gardener.



"What could that woman know about your intentions?" Muminjan asked. "If you men thought..."

"Woman! I'll show you a woman!"

Turdykul ran to the *supa,* pushing the chairman and Salijan aside, and ripped the clothes off the demented one. Everyone saw a wrinkled old man. There was a moment of shocked silence.

"Who are you?" Muminjan asked finally.

The old man's tiny eyes sparkled, but he said nothing.

"Who is he?" Turdykul asked, and burst out in hysterical laughter. "I was just a young boy when he disguised himself in women's clothes."

The old man, seemingly half-dead, suddenly sprang up spritely and struck the gardener on the neck with his fist. After they again laid him on the *supa,* the gardener began to cry.

"Why, oh, why was I afraid of that scoundrel!" he said. "If he had never appeared that snow night, I wouldn't have had so much grief. My wife had gone to visit her mother who was ill. She wanted to take our child, but I was against it — it was too cold. So the child stayed with me. I had to fuss with him for a long time before he finally wore himself out crying and fell asleep. I was about to lie down myself, but that cursed devil came. That was the first time I knew he wasn't a woman. I didn't have the courage to ask why he hid behind women's clothing. Please believe me! I swear to Allah! That night he cried, and almost got down on his knees begging me to find him someone he could trust. It was hard for him to live alone after the *ishan*'s wife died. I refused, and told him I would tell everyone who he was if he bothered me again. That is when he grabbed my child and held him in the air by the leg. He told me if I said a word, he would throw the baby out the window. What

could I do? I had to agree. At first he didn't believe me and demanded that I swear on my mother's grave. I did. Then I went to town and brought back that sly dog Mulladost. I asked that he be taken into the collective farm as the tea-room keeper. That one stayed in the village as his aunt. Before a year had passed Mulladost began to demand that I steal fruit for him from the collective farm orchards. I couldn't refuse. Everything else you already know. And my son ... remained a cripple."

"Dad!" Anzor cried.

But his father did not even look at him.

"Did you know who this man was before?" Salijan asked.

"No, I didn't. I swear. He told me his secret that same night. I don't know why he did. Maybe he had no other choice. He knew I would not betray him. I have suffered too long."

"Why were you so afraid of him?"

"He told me my father was the one who set fire to the storehouse, and caused Nartai's death as well. I believed him."

Turdykul was so overcome he could say no more. Muminjan looked at the old man lying on the *supa* in surprise.

"Turdykul, do you know what happened after I left the village?" Salijan asked.

The gardener shook his head.

"You must remember, you must! After Gyulnara disappeared there were rumors that Raissa Maximovna had run away. Don't you remember?"

"There were rumors," Turdykul said after a pause. "But they weren't true. She didn't run off because she came back ten days later."

"What? She returned?"

"Yes, that much I remember."

"Then what happened?" Salijan urged him on. "Do you know where she had been?"

"No. I only know she came back."

"I know where she was!" Shakhlo said suddenly.

Her announcement was just as big a shock to those gathered as the fact that the demented woman was a frail old man. She and Askar began to relate what they had learned from Jumankul. The old man fidgeted nervously on the *supa.*

"Tell me what happened then?" Salijan turned to Turdykul. "What did Raissa Maximovna do in the village?"

Though Turdykul was just as shocked by the young people's story, he hesitated in answering.

She came to the village around noon, thin and exhausted. The place was deserted — the adults were either in the fields or in the mosque, and the children, who usually filled the streets, were swimming in the river. Raissa Maximovna did not meet anyone she knew. The women who peeked out in fright from behind the clay walls were strangers to her.

Suddenly Turdykul, the *ishan*'s assistant's son, appeared in one of the lanes. He was treated harshly by his strict father, but when he had begun to tell him about the Russian woman — where she went and whom she saw — his father had praised him, which he had never done before. On seeing the teacher, Turdykul again began to follow her. The woman was headed straight for the mosque. That seemed strange to the *ishan*'s assistant's son and he stopped. The teacher entered the courtyard. The porch was full of people. Prayers had just ended and people remained waiting for the *ishan*'s sermon. As soon as she entered, she saw the holy man who was majestically descending the porch steps. Their eyes met. The *ishan* blinked rapidly, as if he could not believe his eyes, and then hurried back up the

steps. He bumped into his assistant who was sitting on a prayer rug, and almost fell. Silence reigned: the Moslems were shocked to see a woman in the mosque.

"You red-haired witch!" the *ishan* cried in horror. "Begone, you evil spirit! Leave Allah's holy mosque!"

Raissa Maximovna continued toward the porch, despite the hostile looks of the parishioners. Several men became frightened, rolled up their prayer rugs hurriedly and left. One man clenched his fists. Raissa Maximovna recognized him: it was Mumin, the lost girl's father. The *ishan* recovered a little from his fright.

"Oh Allah!" he moaned. "Why have you sent this witch to me?"

Raissa Maximovna realized the *ishan* was deeply frightened. He decided to play the fool, secretly hoping that his sermon would help arouse those present and they would attack the woman. She guessed his intentions and laughed. He stepped back.

"What do you want from me?" he asked.

"Very little. I want to talk to you in front of everyone," she said. "Don't be afraid. I am not a ghost. I won't say a word about your activities the last week, you and your assistant will answer for them in court. Now I want to know only one thing: are you a Moslem or not?"

"Allah himself sees that I am his slave and subject!" the *ishan* said.

"They say a Moslem's words and deeds are one and the same, isn't that so?"

"Verily."

"Then if a man says one thing and does another, what will be his punishment?"

The *ishan* immediately became alive, and began to talk as if reading a sermon.

"Oh, what sorrow befalls that sinner! His forehead, nose and cheeks should be smeared with black soot and he should be placed backwards on a mangy donkey!" he said solemnly. "He should be stoned."

"Do you hear what the *ishan* said?" Raissa Maximovna turned to the congregation.

The men were shaken by her conversation with the *ishan,* and did not understand what was going on.

Raissa Maximovna assuredly climbed the steps to the porch, and pushing the *ishan* out of the way, went inside the holy mosque. The *ishan* fell on his assistant, who groaned under his weight. While they struggled to get up, Raissa Maximovna returned with a small girl in her arms, and quickly descended the porch steps. The men stepped back, allowing her to pass. She came face to face with Mumin. He unclenched his fists.

"Gyulnara!" he cried, and gathered up his daughter in an embrace.

Raissa Maximovna left the mosque in silence. Her head was held high. Those gathered assumed she was going to the office, but she disappeared mysteriously before reaching it.

That night, the *ishan* passed away. No one knew from what cause. Everyone in the village was wakened by his wife's loud lamentations.

"What happened then?" Salijan asked. "Tell me!"

"I don't know any more," Turdykul said.

"You must," Salijan said. "You followed her around like a shadow, so you must know. Tell us why she never reached the office."

"I really don't know," Turdykul said, frightened. "Believe me, I am not aware of that."

"What happened to Gyulnara? How did she come to be in the mosque?"

"You should ask her."

"Ask her?" Salijan exclaimed. "Is she here?"

For some reason, Turdykul tried to smile, but only managed to make a long-suffering expression. He looked sullenly at Munira.

"Gyulnara is her mother."

"Are you talking about our doctor?" the chairman asked.

The gardener nodded.

"Now I understand everything," Muminjan said. "The arrival of the doctor, who came to the village temporarily, and then the letter from Salijan who wanted to know about his childhood friends, worried these people. They decided to get rid of Salijan as the more dangerous person to them, since he was the one who wanted to retrace what had happened to the teacher. So the old man took the tea-room keeper's cart into town..."

"But by some miracle, I am still alive," Salijan picked up his thoughts. "I don't understand why that 'demented one' confessed to me? I suspected nothing."

And Salijan explained what the old man had told him while he lay bound.

"He was certain that you would never live to tell anyone his secrets," Muminjan said. "Otherwise, he wouldn't have said a word. But Askar interfered. Who knows, maybe the old man wanted to force Turdykul to kill you."

"I think you are right," Salijan said. He walked closer to the old man. "Does that mean you were the one who set fire to the storehouse and cut the bridge piles?"

The old man remained silent.

"Who are you?" Muminjan asked, bending over him.

The old man merely closed his eyes.

"Tell us your name!" the chairman said, raising his voice.

The old man shook his head, his eyes still closed.

"That is known only to our Creator!" he said in a soft, hoarse voice.

Muminjan shook his head in disappointment.

"There is no point in being evasive," he said. "Why have you hidden behind women's clothing for so many years?"

The old man was mute.

"I think he must have committed a terrible crime before coming to the village, and because of it had to disguise himself as a woman," Salijan hypothesized. "That fact served the purposes of those who were against the new government. With his help, they burned the storehouse and murdered my father, who was a collective farm activist. In order to give themselves an alibi, the *ishan* and his assistant spent the night in the mosque, and were the first to raise the alarm. When the others hurried to put out the fire, they were forced to help. No one would suspect the *ishan's* demented sister-in-law. That is how they managed to keep things hidden."

"After your father's death they decided to do away with the teacher," Muminjan continued. "They kidnapped the little girl, thinking her father would murder the teacher."

"When their plans failed, they sent people to her room at night, who bound her and tried to drown her because they were afraid to kill her right there. They preferred to do away with her further from the village. But thanks to providence, she was saved by the shepherd Kabul. She returned to the village in broad daylight, and went directly to the mosque where they were holding the little girl. Apparently, she knew

about that from the conversation of those who tried to drown her.

"The *ishan* and his people, and that one," Muminjan said pointing to the old man lying on the *supa,* "realized she was headed for the office. He was most probably watching her. They became frightened. If she made it to the collective farm office, they were finished."

"You are right," Salijan said. Then he turned to the gardener. "Did you follow Raissa Maximovna?"

"No, no!" Turdykul said. "My father sent me home immediately."

Salijan looked him directly in the eye.

"He is telling the truth," Salijan said. "They didn't need the boy any more. They obviously intercepted her on the way and carried her off somewhere. That man must know where."

Muminjan turned to the old man. The latter's tiny eyes suddenly opened and enveloped him in their cold stare.

The old man started, as if stabbed by a knife.

"It was no coincidence that the *ishan* died that same night," Salijan noted. "First, he was being punished for his cowardice. He had been afraid to kill the woman in the village and had ordered his henchmen to drown her. Second, his death was necessary to that man to cover his tracks," and he pointed to the old man. "What's more, the *ishan* had to leave the scene since the girl had been found inside the mosque."

"But I still don't understand why that man wanted to take revenge on the teacher," Muminjan said. "Perhaps he was afraid of her for some reason?"

"Raissa Maximovna must have known of some horrible crime he committed before coming to the village. When she arrived to teach in the school, he was afraid she would recognize him."

"Of course, Raissa Maximovna wouldn't have known him initially since he was dressed in woman's clothes. Wait a minute, Salijan!" the chairman exclaimed and leaped up. "Raissa Maximovna — that means her father's name was Maxim."

"That's right," Salijan said, surprised.

"It can't be!" Muminjan shouted, and forced the old man to his feet. "Tell me, are you ... are you Muradulla?"

When Muminjan told the others about his teacher Maxim, and his wife, the old man's wrinkled face froze. Suddenly he broke into hysterical laughter, and trembled all over.

"Oh, God!" he cried in a hoarse voice. "How could these people know what was known only to Allah? How?"

EPILOGUE

It goes without saying that Salijan and Gyulnara were extremely moved at meeting after so many years. They spent long hours recalling their childhood.

"Did you see Turdykul when you first arrived?" Salijan asked her.

"Yes," Gyulnara smiled. "He came up to me one day and begged me not to mention his past to anyone. There was no need for him to ask — he was just a boy then. I was even surprised that he was so afraid of me. I feel sorry for him. He has really aged. If he hadn't introduced himself, I never would have known it was he. It all happened so long ago."

"Who dragged you into the mosque that day?"

"No one."

"You're joking."

"No, Salijan, I went in myself."

"You can't be serious!"

"Yes, I went in after you," she said, surprising Salijan even more. "You walked down our street crying, and I followed you into the mosque."

"No, I didn't go into the mosque," he interrupted her. "My aunt lived on a little side street near the mosque. I was on my way there because I had been told she died that night. That is why I was crying."

"I didn't know. I thought you were in the mosque and went inside. No one was there except the *ishan.* He was reciting prayers. When he saw me he stopped, called me over, and asked why I had come. When he heard I was looking for you, he said you were inside and pointed to a door. I believed him. As soon as I went through the door, it closed on me."

"Didn't you scream?"

"As loud as I could. I even beat on the door but no one opened it. That evening the *ishan* came and told me I had disgraced my parents by going to school. He said I would have to remain there forty days and forty nights praying for Allah to forgive them and save them from death. I grew frightened and cried. I tried to run, but the *ishan* prevented me. He tied my hands and feet, put a gag in my mouth, and carried me to a far corner. He even covered me with a rug."

"Then what happened?"

"I don't know how many days I lay in that damp room. They gave me nothing to eat. I could only cry, and silently at that. I came to the realization that I would never leave that place. I was losing strength. But the *ishan* continued to demand that I pray for my parents. If it hadn't been for Raissa Maximovna..."

"How courageous she was!" Salijan said. "During the investigation Muradulla will tell what they did to her."

They sat in silence for several minutes, each thinking of the teacher.

"My father took us to town soon after her disappearance," Gyulnara said, breaking the heavy silence. "I hadn't been back here for many years. You probably have noticed the village is not the same as we knew it."

The teacher had looked over the village in the few days he'd been there, and there were no signs of those narrow streets and low, clay houses of his childhood. It seemed that even the hill by the river had shrunk almost in half. But that was his imagination. He had been a young boy then, and the hill had seemed enormous.

We know the hill remains as such to our young heroes. Salijan searched for familiar lots and meadows, but found not a one. In their place were new streets and buildings. And there were many more orchards. He recognized only one house, that of the *ishan*, where the "considerate driver" had brought him. But the chairman was about to have the viper's den torn down.

One day the teacher and Gyulnara arrived at the construction site to lend a hand. Ashur was pleased with their work: both of their rows of bricks were perfectly even.

When they descended the scaffold, Muminjan hurried over.

"Great work, master," he laughed. "I see you've begun to teach adults as well."

"Be patient," Ashur said. "Soon it will be your turn."

The young people knew of the conflict between the master and the chairman, and now they realized the bricklayer had

come out on top. Muminjan called Askar over and embraced him.

"Thank you, Askar."

Askar tried to be modest, but could not hide his joy.

"Muminjan, could I ask you a question?" he said.

"Of course, son."

"Do you believe in us now?"

Muminjan looked at Ashur meaningfully and smiled.

"I believe in you, son."

That smile was understandable to everyone, even Salijan and the doctor.

That evening the chairman and the master had another conversation in the office. Ashur threatened to leave the village with his family if Muminjan did not accept his proposal. The master wanted the young people to finish the gym themselves. There were already bricklayers among them. Let the chairman sent the two construction workers back to the farm. Ashur himself would remain with the young people as instructor. On top of everything, he wanted to be assigned to the school for a year so he could begin to teach the young people to make window frames and doors, to lay a floor — in other words, everything needed to make repairs. The smaller details they could work on in their shop classes. There was a reason Askar had asked the chairman whether he believed in them. In the end, the chairman agreed.

Salijan and Shakhlo left for town and everyone came to see them off. Tutikhna even cried. Before they got in the car, Shakhlo turned to Ravshan:

"Will you come to see us next year?"

"No, you come back here," he answered.

"All right."

Askar stood sadly to one side. When he heard that Shakhlo would return the following summer, he cheered considerably and came closer.

The car pulled away, and suddenly Askar began to race about. He had forgotten to tell Shakhlo to write. He wanted to run after the car, but realized he'd never catch it. Should he shout? No, she wouldn't hear him. Maybe she would figure it out for herself. Yes, she would write. It was a very long time until next summer. It would be great if she would write in a week. No, tomorrow!

A week later Munira and her mother also returned to their home in the city. Ravshan helped them load their things. He felt that Munira had changed greatly in the last few days, though there had been no unpleasant conversations between them. They had lost something. But what? It was not anything you could put into words.

When the truck drove over the bridge and turned on the highway, Munira asked the driver to stop. She got out, pressing a book to her chest, and ran to the bridge. She stood for several minutes in silence, looking at the water. Then she carefully took several dried tulips from the pages of the book and threw them in the water. The noisy waves carried them rapidly downstream. She sighed, and slowly walked back to the truck.

...Ravshan suddenly felt that everything around him was empty. He didn't know what to do with himself. What was happening? He sat there on the top of the hill, clutching his knees, and did not want to leave. Munira used to sit there. Now she was gone.

Would she think about him? Probably not. She was angry with him. But she would certainly remember that hill, the river, and the bright stars which twinkled in the sky while she waited there on the hill for her mother. She would remember all that and remember him.

Ravshan hoped Munira would not forget him.

Request to Readers

Raduga Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

Please send all your comments to 17, Zubovsky Boulevard, Moscow, USSR.

A New Book
from Raduga Publishers

ADZHIEV M. *Siberia Rediscovered.*

Economic geographer and journalist Murad Adzhiev has many articles and books about Siberia to his credit. They all deal with the various problems faced by this vast region of the earth at present.

The present volume consists of four parts: Natural Resources, Pages from History, Present Concerns, and Exploitation and Conservation. This gives the reader a short but comprehensive idea of Siberia from the distant past to atomic ice-breakers and the first trips along the Baikal-Amur Railway. The reader will also become acquainted with the varied nature of Siberia.

The book is illustrated with slides, and maps.